

Broccoli Lion

Illustrator: sime

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The Great Cleric

White-Collar

Survival in Another World

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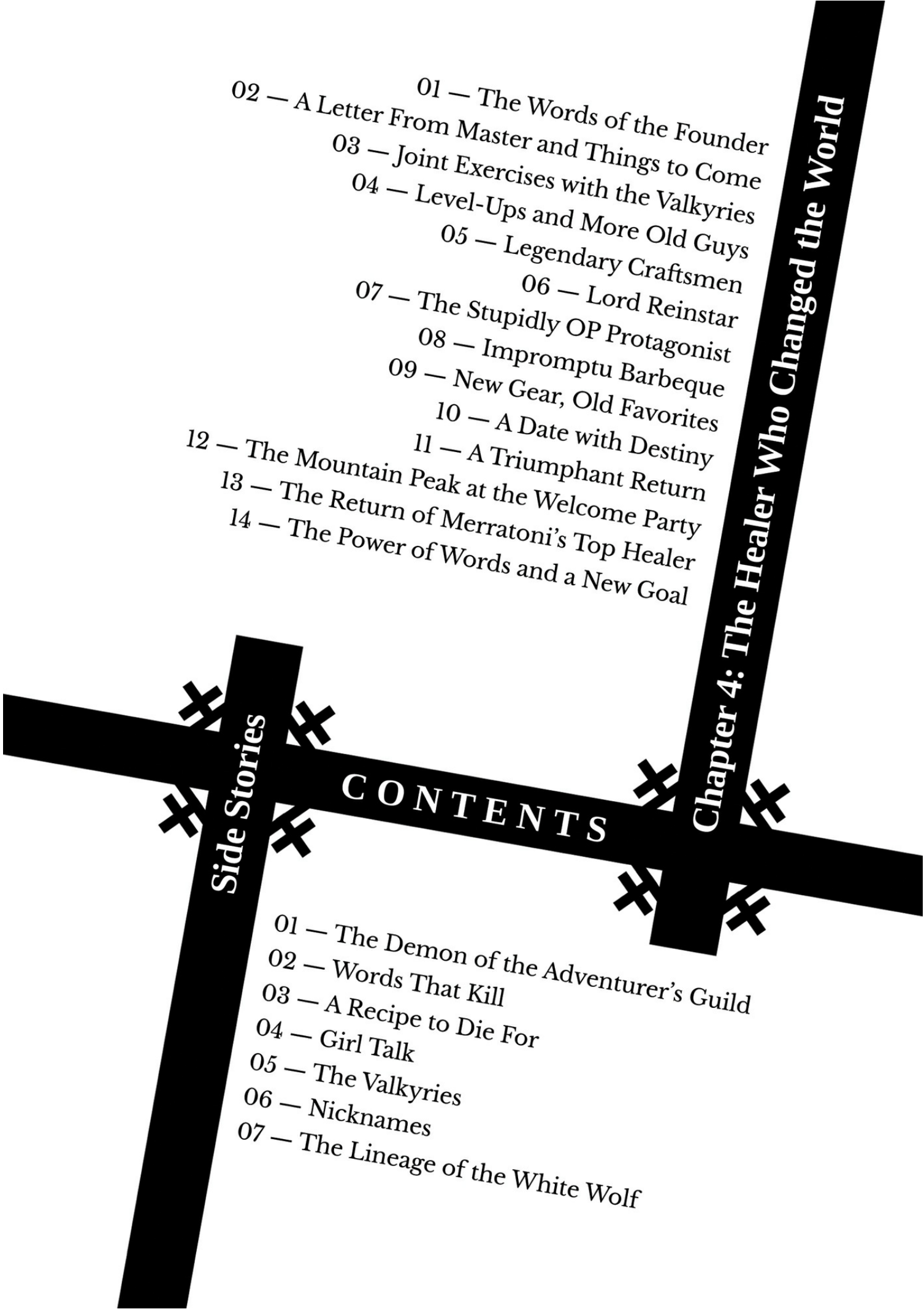
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Chapter 4: The Healer Who Changed the World

01 — The Words of the Founder

Ten days had passed since I'd become an S-rank healer. Ten long days...yet nothing about my routine was all that different, although that might have been because I hadn't done all that much to begin with. The biggest change was probably my inability to leave Headquarters unattended now. Wherever I went, someone needed to be with me, and Jord had volunteered for the task with suspicious enthusiasm. Almost as if he'd been waiting for the chance all his life.

Speaking of Jord, he was currently standing in my room once again.

"Leaving again today, Mister Luciel?"

"Yeah. It's not like I have anything better to do. Don't have any real work even with this new S-rank status, so I'm planning on doing what I normally do."

"Oh. Is that all?" he asked, the spark quickly leaving his eyes.

"Um, that's all. Also, this whole S-rank thing is just a title. I'd really appreciate it if you could talk with me like you used to. You don't need to wait until we're outside."

"Perish the thought, my good sir! You never know who might be listening."

Jord smiled brightly, like he was somehow enjoying himself. He was clearly more ballsy than I. While we were outside the castle, he was all jokes and seemed relaxed, but inside these walls he was all business.

"Wily" was one word I would use to describe him, but I couldn't bring myself to dislike the guy.

"What are you grinning at?" One thing about him was how awful he was at hiding his enjoyment.

"Oh, was I smiling? Weird. Anyway, where shall I squire you today?" And just like that, the conversation had been derailed. Jord's specialty.

“The Adventurer’s Guild. I know it knocked you out last time, but I need to stock up on Substance X.”

His smile vanished instantly. The tragedy that had occurred only a few days earlier had clearly flashed before his eyes. “The...Adventurer’s Guild, you say? Our superiors might take umbrage with that again.”

“I’m hardly worried about that after my speech. And relax, the adventurers won’t give you any trouble this time.”

Jord had been too busy passing out last time and therefore had no idea how much respect he’d garnered for guzzling down that Substance X in front of everyone. To the adventurers, he was my loyal follower.

“If you insist. But just so you know, and I say this for your own good, even though your new rank comes with great authority, don’t forget there are many factions within the Church, and they don’t all agree with you.”

I stiffened up. I had no idea what ideologies made up the Church’s ranks, and I needed that information if I wanted to know how to deal with them. Granhart was at the top of my list of people to ask, but I’d barely spoken to him since my promotion. He’d politely—and stoically—congratulated me, but that was about it. I considered asking Jord to gather information from him, but it would have been obvious that I’d sent him.

What-ifs could go on forever, though. Thinking wasn’t going to get me anywhere, and I had everything I needed for our outing in my magic bag.

“Warning appreciated. Now let’s get going.”

“Sir!”

From the moment we left my room, we were bombarded by judgmental gazes. I was used to the sensation after joining the Valkyries’ training sessions. Jord, on the other hand, was barely hanging in there. By the time we made it outside, his face looked like the tragedy mask Melpomene.

“How are you holding up?” I asked.

“How am I holding up? How do you handle all that, man?” Speaking of masks, my companion’s “loyal follower” persona had abruptly vanished now that we

had left HQ, and we were once more behaving like equals.

“It’s been like that ever since I got involved with the Valkyries. I’m used to it now.”

“What did I just say about factions? They don’t freak you out at all?”

“Well, I’m not looking for trouble, but poison and curses don’t work against me, so I can handle a few glares if that’s all they’re dishing out. They’ll get bored eventually.”

“You’re kind of insane.”

“How so?”

“Normally when people have entire factions out to get them, the first thing they do is...I dunno, join one. Aren’t you scared about being on your own?”

Jord was suddenly making a lot of sense. Purely from the perspective of the Church, he was right. My new status brought a lot more weight to my actions that I had to be cautious about. But if issues with the Church’s factions ever came to a head like Jord feared, and I was forced to leave, I always had a job waiting for me at the local Adventurer’s Guild or the one back in Merratoni. Heck, it’d probably be a lot safer and calmer there.

“Sure, a little, but nothing good’s going to come from worrying. And I’m not alone. I’ve got you, the Valkyries, the pope... I’m grateful to have you all on my side.”

“Ha, something tells me you’re gonna make it big. I mean, you already kind of did, but you get what I’m saying.”

“I’m just a healer with a knack for holy magic. I definitely don’t need to get any bigger than this.” I really didn’t want to think about the hell that could raise.

“I’m starting to get why the Adventurer’s Guild likes you so much. Charitable healers are valuable.”

“Didn’t you say you were a lot like me back in your hometown?”

“Yeah, but y’know... I couldn’t stick to my convictions like you do. I respect you a lot for that.”

“No more compliments. It feels weird coming from you.”

“Does it? Anyway, I’ve been meaning to ask you, why do they call you Saint Weirdo?”

“Let’s change the subject, please.”

Jord laughed. “You can talk about getting poisoned or cursed like it’s nothing, but nicknames are your weakness? You’re too much.”

Oh, I’m so glad my suffering brings you joy. “You know, Jord, you really let your hair down once you leave the castle.”

“Can you blame me? It’s so stuffy in there. Can’t stand it. And healers don’t get many chances to get out.”

“Why’s that?”

“The Church isn’t exactly popular with the people lately, you know?”

I hesitated for a moment. What if this question was bait and some faction was trying to probe me? Then again, it wasn’t like my opinions about the Church were a secret, so I trusted my gut.

“Yeah, true. It was rough at first, but they liked me more once I stomached some Substance X and started healing people at fair rates.”

“And there it is. That’s what makes you weird.”

“Why? Is it that hard for other healers to get around?”

“I’d say so. They’re not keen on being glared at everywhere they go. But I guess some of us get stuck ’cause of the faction drama.”

“Hold on, is that the reason you volunteered to...”

Jord cleared his throat loudly. “Let us continue onward, my liege!”

Oh yeah, he was a wily one, all right. I could learn a thing or two from him. “Drop the formal act if you want to keep coming out with me.”

“Fine, fine. Er, oh, we’re already there.”

“We sure are. What’re you standing around for? Come on, through the door.”

I pushed him into the guildhall. It was mid-afternoon, so there were only a

handful of adventurers inside, clearly much to Jord's relief. He reminded me of my younger self. I couldn't help but smile.

"What's so funny?" he asked.

"You look just like I did when I first came to an Adventurer's Guild. Feeling a bit nostalgic."

"Were you, uh, nervous too?"

"Oh, yeah. I was so scared that someone would kill me if I even looked at them wrong, but luckily no one was actually that homicidal."

"Yeah, right, that's...reassuring. They'd be bandits at that point, wouldn't they?"

"Exactly. Now come on, to the dining hall."

Only a few adventurers were in the hall, with Grantz behind the counter. Several of the diners saw me enter and immediately fled in panic, leaving only three customers who had just started their lunches. Jord sighed, relieved that no one had commented on him or his Church-issued robe.

I wondered if there were any patients who needed healing as I made my way over to greet the guildmaster. "Hello, Grantz. I'm here to fill up on Substance X."

"Back with yer watchdog again, eh?" he growled with a smile. It was better than the glower he'd given Jord last time but evidently not by much based on my fellow healer's grimace.

"He's more of a valet than a watchdog. I'm giving him some fresh air since he's with the 'Please Let Me Out of the Castle Already' faction."

"That's one helluva crowd!" Grantz guffawed. "So, how many barrels ya need?"

"Ten, please."

"Want a mug for the road?"

"Hmmm, sure. Maybe those kind adventurers over there will join me."

The trio immediately panicked.

“Nope, not happenin’, Saint Weirdo. We just got back from our mission this morning, y’see.”

“Yeah, we’re adventurers, not ascetic monks. Spare us the suffering!”

“Hey, pal, you’re his chauffeur or whatever, aren’tcha? You gotta stop this! All hell breaks loose when the Saint starts leerin’ like that! Even the damn guildmaster loses it!”

The three of them pleaded with Jord with their eyes.

“Um...I think we should make a run for it while we still can,” my colleague said as his eyes searched for a way out. But it was too late.

“Open those mouths, ya wimps. Take some Substance X and lunch will be on me. And don’t even try to weasel outta this. You too, fella.”

“Damn you, Saint Weirdo!” the adventurers cried in despair, knowing that all hope was lost.

Jord, however, continued to struggle in vain, still seeking a reprieve on account of him not being an adventurer.

“Excuse me, um, why me?”

“Thought you were ’is servant.” There was no escape. His fate was sealed.

“Your heart is cold, Luciel,” he whimpered.

The guildmaster brought out our mugs of Substance X, and I downed mine first.



Jord and the others watched in disgust, then grudgingly brought their mugs to their lips. Surprise... They immediately passed out.

I chatted with Grantz to kill some time until they regained consciousness. “Why is it always me they yell at? You’re just as much to blame as I am.”

“Cause you’re an easy target? You’re young. Makes you the punching bag. And then there’s that talk about the stuff making you stronger.”

“There’s some truth to that, actually. You need to be careful, though, because it prevents you from leveling up.”

“Since when?!”

“Just look at me. I’m proof of that.”

Who would have guessed that my inability to escape level one had been Substance X’s doing all along? Certainly not Brod or Gulgar, the culprits who had forced me to start drinking it. Although to be fair, my stats had still gone up, and my skills were nothing to sneeze at, so it wasn’t all bad.

“But there *is* a reason ta drink it, right?”

“I’d say it depends on the context. For me, I’m not fighting monsters every day, so I’m not going to level up anyway. If I keep this up for another year, I’m hoping my resistances will be nice and sturdy across the board.”

“Resistances, eh? Appreciate the info.”

Almost no one knew the specific advantages or disadvantages of Substance X, not even Brod, according to his letter. But maybe, just maybe, once more adventurers started drinking it, they’d *finally* stop calling my tongue “defective.”

“Don’t mention it. I owe the guild a lot. So, anything new?”

“Not much, ’cept for low-rankers who keep askin’ to spar with ya.”

With a healer? “Why?”

“The fame. What else?”

“The *fame*? Is there glory in beating up a healer? What am I, a wanted man?”

“Dunno, pal, but you sure as hell ain’t a normal healer. I’ve seen how ya fight with the Whirlwind.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? I was fighting for my life back then! And my master destroyed me!”

“Still didn’t keep ya from healin’ yourself back up over and over. They don’t call ya the Masochist Zombie for nothin’.”

“Could we please just settle on Saint Weirdo?” I was so sick of the other nicknames.

Grantz howled with laughter. “Well, just so ya know, you might be gettin’ some challenges pretty soon if you don’t mind giving ’em a round.”

What kind of guildmaster went around encouraging fights? “No, thanks, I’m good. If I actually managed to beat them, it’d be high-rankers next.”

“Now where’s the fun in that? Let’s make a wager. Loser has ta drink Substance X. It’ll be great for the guild, eh?”

“Sure, but horrible for me. What do I get out of any of this?”

“Ya get to fight strong folks.”

I was already getting plenty of that with the Valkyries. My combat training schedule was well and truly booked.

“Listen, I’m a healer.”

“You’re also an adventurer.”

“It’s not happening. I’m too busy.”

“Bah, whatever,” he sighed. “Where’d you get that attendant fella from anyway?”

He had finally bothered to ask. Me being an S-rank healer was a secret to the public, though, and it made things difficult.

“Apparently, I’m a bit of a troublemaker. Luckily, I got to choose who my escort would be, so I went with Jord.”

“You catch heat over the riots the other day?”

“No, that wasn’t the issue. I just kind of...broke a certain something at HQ.”

“Sounds like you’re more adventurer than healer ta me.”

“You might have a point. I’m just glad they didn’t toss me in a cell.”

“My doors are always open if ya ever get sick o’ that place.”

“I’ll take you up on that if I end up on the run.”

“You’ve got plenty of accomplices here.”

Once Jord and the others woke, I put the barrels of Substance X into my bag, then my attendant and I left the guildhall. On our way home, Jord insisted that we shop around for magic items on the main street. By the time we arrived back at HQ, he was looking thoroughly disheartened.

“We’re back, Jord. You can’t sulk forever.”

“Yes, I can. Everything in life is pain, and I will never be happy again. This is the *Holy City* for crying out loud! How can the magic items be that lame?!”

“You should have told me that was what you were looking for.”

Jord had grown quieter and quieter as we’d looked around the shops’ selection of magic items, and when I had pointed it out, I’d learned that buying some of those items was the main reason he had wanted to leave the castle in the first place. Unfortunately, not one item we’d come across even held a candle to what the shop outside the labyrinth had in stock.

“Man, and I used to be an exorcist! Now I wish I’d actually tried a little harder!”

“Why don’t I ask Catherine if the shop’s items are for sale the next time I see her?”

“You’d do that?!”

“Sure. I’ll ask some adventurers too.”

“Mister Luciel, I swear to you, I shall endeavor to be the best attendant you have ever seen. Now, onward!”

Jord marched into the castle, positively glowing with joy. I watched from behind for a moment, smiling wryly, before following him in.

When we reached my room, I said, “I’m sorry to dump this on you, but I want to meet with Granhart to learn more about these factions. Could you pass that along?”

“To Mister Gran? Of course! You wait here, sir!” he replied and promptly took off.

A knock soon came at my door.

“Come in.” The knob turned and in walked Granhart. “Oh, Mister Granhart! I didn’t expect you to come all the way to *me*.”

“Please, as I said before, sir, you need not apply titles to my name. As it happens, I have business to discuss with you myself, so it’s no trouble.”

“Oh, in that case, please have a seat. I’ll prepare some tea.”

“I do not intend to impose.”

“You aren’t. It’ll only take a second.”

I pulled out a chair for him and summoned a pot of freshly made tea and some light snacks from my bag.

“That is an impressive item you have there.”

I thought he’d known about my magic bag. He was less informed than I’d expected.

“I wouldn’t have gotten my hands on one if not for the labyrinth. It’s thanks to you, since you appointed me to the Combat Exorcist Unit.”

“I see.” He cast his eyes down. “That is fortunate.”

Was he not the one who had assigned me? “I don’t mean that in a bad way, for the record.”

“I know. Don’t mind me. Now, please correct me if I am mistaken, but you wish to know more about the parties that make up the Church?”

“That’s right. And what is it you wanted to speak to me about?”

“Official discussions will soon begin regarding the legislative guidelines for healing that you proposed in your inaugural address.”

“What?! How do you know that?” When the heck had that been decided, and why hadn’t the pope filled me in on something so important?

“Aligning with a faction makes one privy to certain information. I wanted you to be aware of that.”

My head had been filled with nothing but the labyrinth for so long, it never really hit me until now that the Church was so divided. How far could I realistically go on my own?

“So, you want something from me, don’t you?”

“You are correct.”

“Can I ask what that is?”

“I want to show the people that we, the Church of Saint Shurule, exist for their salvation. I want to end the hatred of healers, to better ourselves as an institution.”

“What do you mean?” I had never imagined that I’d hear such words coming from this man’s mouth.

He broke into a bitter smile. “Do you remember your first day here? When you questioned the guild’s leadership?”

“How could I forget? It all leads back to why I was called to Headquarters to begin with. I remember bringing up the need for standard rules regarding the cost of healing.”

“In truth, I doubted your claims at the time. I thought you a smooth-talking juvenile.”

Frankness, the likes of which I had never expected, from Granhart of all people, came bursting through the dam. I felt proud that he had come to trust me.

“I don’t blame you. You looked like you didn’t want to believe me.”

“No, I didn’t. So I had to see it for myself. I conducted investigations of guilds from every nation, overseen by third parties, tradesmen, adventurers, and the like, in the name of objectivity.”

“You went that far?” His devotion to the Church astounded me.

“A part of me wishes I had not. There were so many discoveries, so many truths that I cannot unsee.”

“But none of that’s your fault.”

“I share the blame. I was blind to everything around me, anything that was not within the Church Headquarters itself.”

I wondered if Granhart was a child of the Church, maybe a member’s son. How else could he have gone for so long without hearing about all the unrest?

Speaking with him was always nerve-racking, and I was going to suffocate if the tension in this conversation became any thicker, so I changed the subject.

“Is your faction aware of all this?”

“Yes. What I am asking is for you to let me aid you in the drafting of the guidelines.” He stood up, a fire burning in his eyes. “Before our institution’s name is besmirched any further.”

“I would love to have your help. But what party are you aligned with?”

“Yes, excuse me. Let me explain the philosophies within the Church. There are three primary groups: The Loyalists, who prioritize the pope’s will above all else. The Reformists, helmed by profiteering executives. And my own group, the Moderates, whose only concern is the general welfare of the people.”

From the outside, I probably looked like a Loyalist given I was Her Holiness’s direct subordinate.

“What’s the difference between the Loyalists and the Moderates?”

“Loyalists, true to their name, are loyal only to Her Holiness. Her orders are absolute, the be-all and end-all. Moderates, however, do not blindly follow authority figures. Our only allegiance is to the people.”

There weren’t many who had the privilege of meeting with her, but the pope was certainly no dictator. She seemed extremely open-minded, so I didn’t see the point of the distinction.

“So, your faction wants to ensure that the pope doesn’t have absolute power.

But the Reformists hold the most influence at the moment, right? Why don't the Loyalists and Moderates work together?"

"Out of curiosity, why do you say the Reformists are the most influential?"

"That's just my impression. It fits with the current narrative. I don't think people would be calling healers money-hungry so much unless there was a money-hungry faction in power."

"Is that all?"

"For the most part."

As much as I wanted to, I couldn't fully trust Granhart yet. He was the one who had orchestrated my transfer to HQ based on Bottaculli's letter, so I couldn't rule out the possibility that he was actually a Reformist. I still needed the knowledge that he could provide, though. This was perhaps something to look into with Her Holiness and Catherine.

"Very well. What do you say to my offer of assistance?"

"I think our goals are the same. You worry for the Church like I worry for the future of healers, and we could do a lot of good if we worked together."

"Thank you. I believe so as well."

"No, I should be the one thanking you." I held out my hand and Granhart shook it without hesitation.

"Now, where to begin? Perhaps noteworthy individuals within the factions."

"I'm all ears."

Time flew by as we began drafting up the new healer guidelines in earnest.

*

Progress on the rulebook had slowed considerably, and the primary culprit for that was the problem of pre-existing healing rates. Everyone had their own standards for how they valued their magic, and making sweeping changes to the prices willy-nilly could put people's livelihoods in jeopardy. I knew that I'd spend my entire life regretting it if I let this chance pass me by, but I seemed to be the only one who felt the need to rip the band-aid off and rebuild our system

from the ground up.

I was filled with hesitation and indecision. So I turned to someone I could trust.

“And that’s why I’ve been prioritizing other work over the labyrinth lately.”

“I wondered how you were spending your days. But you’re certain I’m the one you ought to confide in?” Lumina asked, trying to hide her confusion.

“You don’t think so? I figured there was no harm in talking to you about it, plus there’s no one around to eavesdrop. Who would think we’d be having a serious discussion in the middle of a training session?”

“That’s because banter tends to leave one awfully open.”

I saw her lunge towards me, and an instant later, my back violently slammed into something hard, knocking the wind out of me.

“It’s that bad?” I wheezed as I cast Heal on myself.

“I did just throw you to the ground.”

“That you did. Where did you learn to do that?” It sure wasn’t part of any training I’d seen the Valkyries do so far.

“Surpass me, then maybe I’ll divulge that information. But enough chitchat, I want to see you at your best. Go all out; we have your healing skills for injuries.”

“Chitchat”? I’d thought I was confiding in her, but okay. Ouch.

“All right, but can I ask your thoughts on something first?”

“What might that be?”

“You’re pretty well-traveled, right? It’s fair to say your understanding of how things are outside Headquarters, and what people think of healers, is better than most?”

She tilted her head. “It has been some time since I was asked to oversee an inspection, so I’m afraid I can’t speak to the specifics.” Then she nodded. “But I suppose I can speak with some authority.”

“Any amount is fine. I just wanted to know... Do you think, objectively, that healers are hated?”

“I think the vast majority are, yes. Exceptions like you do exist, but based on my own experiences, adventurers tend to despise them. Especially beastfolk.”

“Human supremacy is a deep issue, so I don’t see a quick and easy solution to that problem. But I’m relieved to hear that we agree. Just how would you fix something like that?”

“You would be better suited to finding that answer yourself, Luciel.”

“Oh, I don’t mean to make it your problem. I’m just waffling here, so I wanted to hear someone else’s opinion.” I wasn’t conceited enough to assume that my own ideas were more valid than anyone else’s.

“Hm... Your goal is to improve public regard for healers, correct?”

“That and to keep the healers themselves satisfied at the same time.” I knew how impossible that sounded, but I only needed a hint of an idea to cling to.

“What about reducing prices temporarily as a proof of concept?”

“Sorry, but try not to think along those lines.” Drastically lowering prices and then raising them back to normal was basically asking for riots. It was too risky to try.

“Not everyone will see eye-to-eye with you. I think it’s a fool’s errand to attempt to satisfy every single person.”

“I don’t disagree with you there, but I feel anxious, like I need to move fast, before other would-be healers get caught up in the hate and corruption.”

“Then why not leave the decision-making to the individual?”

“The individual? You mean let the patient choose their healer and the magic they’re treated with?”

“You once said that the magic one uses to heal another should be based on a thorough examination, correct? If the results of said examination were relayed to the patient and the choice was his or her own, the responsibility would not fall on the healer.”

Now that was an interesting option. I knew two heads would be better than one. The next time I had a chance, I needed to remember to ask the other Valkyries for their input as well.

“There are some holes in that, but you’ve given me some hope for getting this draft passed. I appreciate it.”

“I’m glad to help. Where are your thoughts at now?”

“Right, well...”

*

“Luciel? Luciel! Are you listening?” A voice from beyond my consciousness interjected just as I was about to explain the gist of my proposal to Lumina in my daydream. “Luciel! What are you muttering to yourself over there?”

“Huh? Oh, sorry, Catherine. I zoned out thinking about something from earlier today.”

I’d lost myself in contemplation, but Catherine had brought me back to the present. Big names from every faction sat around us, looking down at the documents that I’d put together.

“Please keep your head on straight. We’re all here because *you* insisted there was a problem that needed rectifying.”

“I’m sorry.”

She was absolutely right. How stupid would it have been to blow it all just like that after coming so far? Granhart’s information, Lumina’s advice, and my completed draft would have gone to waste.

“The poor boy must be tired. It’s not even been a month since his big ceremony and yet he’s prepared quite an admirable amount of material for this meeting,” the archbishop remarked. According to Granhart and Catherine, Mardan was a prominent figure within the Moderates faction but a gentle and pious old man.

The documents that everyone had sitting before them were my proposed guidelines for healing services. It made an examination of the patient a required step for the treatment process and gave patients the right to know how they would be healed and what they would be charged. It also outlined new pricing options for magic, prohibited the indiscriminate use of high-level spells, and considered several measures that the Church itself could take in its leadership

of the guild.

“This is a fair point; however, I must say I expected this document to be related to legislative practices, not the total restructuring of the healing profession.” The speaker, Muneller, was a man with a face like a backstreet peddler. His exact title was a mystery, but he was the pope’s right hand, often appearing at events, domestic and international, in Her Holiness’s place.

Before this meeting, he’d pulled me aside to tell me, “I will not pretend to be your ally, but you have been given the floor, and you would do well to make use of it.”

“I concur. The healers would strike en masse if this were made law,” Dongahar (yes, that was his real name) declared. He was the head of the Reformists and had opposed this gathering right up until our meeting began.

Normally the dissent of the most powerful faction’s leader would be a death sentence to any form of legislature, but Her Holiness’s purge of the most corrupt members of the Church had hit the Reformists hard, and they’d lost a substantial amount of clout. This gave the pope some bargaining power to strike a deal with them and allowed the meeting to proceed.

“But who are we to disobey Her Holiness?” the former templar captain remarked. After an injury had forced him to retire from active duty, Bulteuse had devoted himself to the Church as a healer and risen through the ranks to archbishop at a surprisingly young age, making him the subject of many nasty rumors. But his affable personality made him well-liked by his peers. Although a Loyalist at heart, he was something of an independent and, based on what Granhart had told me, nearly as influential as some Reformists. Along with Catherine, he was moderating the discussion.

“Indeed, but the fact is that rebellion would be *highly* likely if we suddenly shackled healers where once they had liberties,” Dongahar insisted. “In fact, as the arbiter of this change, Luciel’s life could be put in danger by it.”

A chill ran down my spine. That was no statement of concern—it was a warning. I was sturdy enough that any assassination attempt that didn’t kill me on the spot wasn’t worth worrying about, but I made a mental note to keep my guard up.

“We cannot ignore these problems any longer than we already have. Unless you would see the Church and its authority crumble to the ground?” Mardan challenged.

“Oh, well, then I suppose we ought to pass Luciel’s plans straight to Her Holiness for ratification immediately, *archbishop*.” Dongahar glared daggers at me, and I knew at once that this man was going to be difficult.

“Not immediately, no. There are holes to be filled in and details to be discussed, as I’m sure you are well aware.”

“So long as the changes are not drastic, I suppose it does merit some thought.” For a group called “Reformists,” Dongahar seemed awfully conservative.

“Then we are in agreement that our current duty is to see to the restructuring of the Healer’s Guild,” Muneller stated.

Mardan smiled and nodded, but Dongahar refused to hide his reluctance and said, “Very well. What are we to do? Surely these documents aren’t to serve as the basis.”

“Luciel,” the elderly Mardan addressed me, “will these guidelines of yours truly restore the name of healers and the Church?”

Finally. I’d been sitting there wondering how long everyone was going to argue before my existence was acknowledged. “Frankly, no. They aren’t nearly enough.”

“Not *enough*?” the Reformist repeated. But it was far too soon for the conversation to be getting that heated. I was just getting warmed up.

“As I said during my speech, ‘healer’ and ‘greedy’ are nearly synonymous for a reason. While corrupt healers destroy lives by charging obscene prices, the Church and the guild they oversee have remained silent. Complicit.”

“I see your logic, but it’s simply impossible for us to know what is going on in every single clinic,” Dongahar countered. “What if high-level magic is deemed necessary to cure a wound, and the patient rebukes the healer and questions their judgment after treatment?”

That was a very good question. Prioritize the people too much and the healers themselves would suffer for it. This was where a certain common-sense system from my past life came in: health insurance.

“We could protect against that by asking for the patient’s consent and having them sign to receive treatment. In cases where they’re unconscious, we would ask a friend or family member in their place.”

“I see. We create joint liability.”

“Exactly. I’m also toying with the idea of having the Adventurer’s Guild front some of the cost of treating its members, if necessary.” Whether this would be of use to the people, or whether they’d even accept such a system, I couldn’t decisively say. But I figured presenting the option to a group of top faction leaders wasn’t a bad idea.

“The Adventurer’s Guild is not responsible for the injuries of its members. I simply cannot fathom why they would accept your proposal,” Muneller said.

“You’re absolutely right. You can only register as an adventurer after agreeing to the condition that the guild is not liable for your actions. But consider for a moment what would happen if a healer told an injured adventurer they couldn’t be treated without money.”

“The blame would fall on the healer. They would be considered greedy.”

Pure objectivity was the name of the game here. I couldn’t let my own personal feelings muddle things. They wanted to hear how this would benefit the Healer’s Guild.

“Right, and that would be unfair. So by placing the responsibility of payment on the Adventurer’s Guild, the fault falls on them, not the healer.”

Dongahar cackled. “Now there’s an idea! You mean to turn the tables on them.”

“It won’t be that easy if the healers are the only ones benefiting.”

“But enacting your guidelines would balance the scales,” Mardan observed.

“In theory. I’m sure the healers who have coasted along with the current system will vehemently oppose these changes, but I believe this would help to

make healing a respectable occupation again.”

Silence followed as the men thought things over, seemingly favorably, until Mardan asked, “May I pose a question?”

“Of course.”

“What is it that drives you? For whom do you champion these ideals? Tell me honestly.”

I faltered for a moment. But I felt like I knew the answer, like I’d known it vaguely for some time. “That’s a good question. Part of it is for the people, of course, and part of it is for my fellow healers. But at the same time, I feel like—at first, at least—it was for myself.”

“Yourself?”

“In Merratoni, where I first became a healer, there was a clinic filled with talent, with healers capable enough to use spells like High Heal. As I’m sure you’re all aware, it takes a Holy Magic skill of at least level six to be able to cast that spell, so when I first heard about the place, I was filled with respect and admiration for the effort they’d put in just to help others.”

If Bottaculli hadn’t been playing with adventurers’ lives, I’d have loved to have learned from him.

“But we’re only human, and we’re drawn to material possessions, just as I’m sure that clinic was. As it turned out, their only intention was to squeeze every copper they could out of their patients, knowing full well that what they were doing would incite hatred.”

“Then your aim in all of this is to avoid being hated?”

“In a sense. I believe that dedicating yourself to a craft for so long only to use your talents for selfish gain is a horrible waste. By clearly defining rates and services, and making an accessible environment for all people to receive treatment, we can make healing affordable for everyone. Our jobs will become busier, but we can make healers revered again.”

To say nothing of the advances in class and skill levels this would lead to.

“And then maybe someday children will tell their parents, ‘I want to be a

healer when I grow up.’ That is the future I dream of. No matter what obstacles I face, no matter what storms I weather, I will not waver. I am an S-rank healer, and I will bring hope to the people.”

Of course, I was ignoring the fact that kids didn’t really get to choose what they wanted to be when they grew up—that choice was made for them at their coming-of-age ceremony. Still...

The room was dead quiet. I’d gotten a *bit* worked up there, and now everyone was staring at me. In silence.

I looked awkwardly over at the moderators, and Catherine was jolted out of her trance.

“Luciel has clearly given very serious thought to the future of healers. How will the floor respond?”

“The man has conviction. I say we deliberate on his proposal more thoroughly.” Dongahar’s tune seemed to have done a one-eighty out of nowhere, and he began to reread my draft in earnest.

Everyone else followed, and soon the only sound that filled the room was the flipping of pages.

“‘I am an S-rank healer, the bringer of hope.’ Perhaps it’s youth that spurs him to quote such legendary words,” Dongahar muttered, “or perhaps it is that fire that carried him to his current position.”

Now Dongahar was *complimenting* me. “Legendary words”? I couldn’t have been more lost.

“Excuse me, what?”

“I knew this proposal was important to you,” Catherine said, “but I never imagined you felt strongly enough to quote the guild’s founder, Lord Reinstar Gustard himself.”

Reinstar whosit? I’d quoted somebody? I remembered once reading a story about a Reinstar-something-or-other back in Merratoni, but I’d forgotten nearly everything about it. And something about this whole ordeal made me feel that it wasn’t the best time to ask who he was.

“Please, there’s no need to make a fuss over it. How I feel is irrelevant to whether it’s right for the Church or not.”

“Oh, but we do not exaggerate,” Bulteuse said. “This is your first act as an S-ranker, Luciel. If ever there is a day when your life’s achievements are recorded in text, this meeting will go down in the annals of history throughout the world.”

If they weren’t exaggerating before, they certainly were now. Bulteuse began reeling off instructions to the recordkeeper as if my biography were already well underway.

“We must endeavor to ensure that Luciel wants for nothing on his travels,” Mardan said passionately.

Since when was traveling part of the S-rank job description?

“It would be too dangerous for him to set off alone like Lord Reinstar, though. We must consider the organization of a personal guard,” Muneller added.

“Shall we gather companions from the knights?” Dongahar suggested.

“By my understanding, Luciel is friendly with the Valkyries, but assigning both the Captain of the Guard *and* those women to him would be demanding.”

Granhart had told me flat out not to expect the factions to come together in agreement. *Ever*. Which made me extraordinarily confused by what I was currently witnessing. And now there was suddenly talk about companions and traveling that didn’t sound like they meant a mere few stops around the country. What had I done to deserve this?

“I’m sorry, Luciel, but we can’t send the girls with you,” Catherine said apologetically.

“Um...” I had so many bad feelings about this.

“Say no more,” Dongahar interrupted. “You are, of course, free to purchase slaves abroad if you’re ever in need of capable fighting hands on your journey.”

“No, that’s not what I...”

“Be at ease. Your S-rank healer card will ensure that you’re shown the proper respect and veneration, even in Illumasia,” Muneller informed me.

Not one of these people understood my anxiety. Traveling domestically was already a life-or-death gamble for me, and now they wanted me to travel the entire freaking *world*? Was this because of that damn dragon's protection? No, that would be a stretch, even if an international tour was a surprisingly convenient excuse to free his imprisoned brethren. Good thing there was no way I'd be conquering any more labyrinths.

"He's likely to be investigating acts of corruption at his destinations, so he'll need an arclink crystal to communicate. We'll have to get in contact with Neldahl. I'll inform Her Holiness," Bulteuse said.

"I will prepare a map for him," Mardan added.

"Your Horsemanship skill will need improvement if you're going to travel, Luciel. It's safe enough here in Shurule, but you'll have to worry more about bandits and such once you step beyond our borders. Can you ask the Valkyries for help with that?"

"Uh, sure?"

Catherine probably knew that Forêt Noire was the only horse I could actually ride. Skill level didn't determine whether you could sit on any one horse's back, but Forêt was the only one that didn't buck me off the second I tried.

"How I wish I were young enough to join you, but alas," Dongahar lamented.

"Let us do everything in our power to aid Luciel on his journey so that he may depart well prepared and with haste!" Mardan announced.

Everyone present voiced their agreement, and the discussion quickly returned to the matter of the guidelines.

Over the course of several days, we met with specialists from each of the factions as we ironed out the final draft. Seeing it take shape and evolve from a bare-bones document into formal legislation with an actual schedule for enforcement, and watching notices get sent out to the guild branches, made me frustrated with how little I knew about the process. There wasn't nearly enough for me to do.

By some miracle, only ten days after our first meeting, nearly every aspect of my original draft had been incorporated and approved by every faction, then

subsequently ratified by the pope.

Ironically, this made me less excited and more concerned about its fragility. At any moment, any one of the Church's fractured groups could have stopped the guidelines dead in their tracks, just like that.

02 — A Letter From Master and Things to Come

The day after my guidelines were approved, I was summoned by the pope.

“Luciel, well done making good on your words from the ceremony.”

“Thank you, Your Holiness, but the credit goes to the cooperation of the factions and their specialists. They reminded me how woefully inexperienced I am.”

“Take pride, young healer. Your modesty is admirable, but it was you who engendered change.”

“All the same, I owe this success to the support of my peers.”

“Ah, but it was your own words that moved mountains, was it not, bringer of hope? Not even I imagined that you might bridge ideological divides through the words of our founder, Lord Reinstar. Your passion gladdens me, but do be cautious of your limits.”

The shock was mutual. How was I supposed to have known that every leader of every faction had memorized nearly the entirety of Lord Reinstar’s biography? Or that every freaking word held some particular significance? For crying out loud, wasn’t that level of devotion supposed to be reserved for fanatics and scholars? Way to screw me over, Monsieur Luck.

“Thank you for your concern.”

“Think nothing of it. You are my one and only emissary. Now, have you heard of the matter regarding the guidelines? Mardan and Muneller are to take the helm for the time being.”

“Yes. The laws were ratified under my name, but they’re to negotiate behind the scenes to help deal with the backlash. Someone as young as I am would be an easy target for criticism.”

S-rank or not, a teenager was apt to be looked down on. That was why I’d asked for help from someone with more weight to throw around.

“Indeed. Dongahar will head the coordination of a timetable for

enforcement.”

“So I’ve heard. I’ve been told it could be several years before they’re implemented in full force, but all that matters to me is that it eventually happens.”

The nail that sticks out is hammered down. This was true in any world and all the more reason to play the networking game. If the information Granhart had given me was to be trusted, the guidelines would mean huge losses for the Reformists, so I had handed Dongahar the important role of overseeing the transition period.

“I do not think we will need to wait that long. As it happens, I was offered a proposal by the faction leaders.”

“May I ask what it was about?”

“When you reach the age of twenty, we will make your status as an S-rank healer public, as well as your role as an architect of the coming changes.”

It had never been my idea to hide my rank in the first place, so that was fine by me. The real question was why they’d bothered to bring it up with Her Holiness.

“That sounds fine, but surely there’s a reason they asked you for this.”

“There is. One I will not yet reveal.”

“As you wish. What exactly is my job as an S-rank healer anyway?”

“Nothing in particular. Should you have time to spare, the labyrinth is open to you. Ah, and Catherine tells me that you struggle with horsemanship. I recommend that you work to remedy that.”

The labyrinth could be as open as it wanted, that didn’t mean I’d ever enjoy going down there. And for some reason, horses hated my guts. All horses except for Forêt, that is. I considered asking Her Holiness to let me buy her from the Church if worst came to worst.

“I’ll keep training.”

“When the time comes for you to set out, you may come to blows with monsters or bandits. You would do well to prepare yourself before then.”

“Of course. I’d definitely prefer to avoid dying just because I wasn’t able to ride properly in the middle of a battle.”

“Death is one possibility; however, I fear your concerns are best directed towards the risk of becoming a slave. Allow yourself to be captured and never again would you be free, your life nothing more than a tool to heal ruffians’ wounds. This would not only be a loss for the Church but for the entire world, so I implore you to train well.”

I felt goosebumps rising all over my body. “I will be *thoroughly* ready.”

“Well said. When you turn twenty, the time will come for you to journey to the many Healer’s Guilds of the world. Thus I would also ask that you inform yourself of the workings of the guild and its clinics.”

So, it had just been decided that I’d travel the world once I turned twenty? Why and how? *I swear, if it’s that dragon’s blessing...*

“As for the business of your personal guard, I have entrusted the matter to Catherine. Speak to her about the details. I leave you with my first order, S-rank Luciel: before the world knows your name, be prepared.”

“Yes, Your Holiness.” As if I had a choice.

I left her chamber, wondering what point there was to me actually being at HQ.

With the guidelines now completely out of my hands, I had jack squat to do, so I wound up going back to my room. The clock was ticking down the minutes until the entire world knew my name, but I wasn’t concerned about that as much as I was with figuring out what to do for the next year and five months. Spending the entire time studying didn’t sound appealing. Boosting my skills was another option, or maybe getting to know my would-be companions once Catherine chose them. Boy, a year and five months sure was a long time...

Someone was standing in front of my room when I arrived.

“Oh, Jord, did you need something?”

“I have a letter addressed to you, sir.”

My master's name was written on the front. "Ah, he's the guildmaster at the Merratoni Adventurer's Guild. I'm surprised they delivered it here."

"I'm sure seeing your name on it motivated some hands. And I don't think the receptionists will be forgetting your master any time soon after he stormed the castle."

I figured Jord would evade any questions regarding how he'd gotten his hands on a letter addressed to me, so I took it and went into my room to read it.

Luciel,

I hope you're not slacking off on your training. People have come knocking for me to teach them, but no one can last longer than a few days. It's been boring around here.

Anyway, I have the results of that testing we did with Substance X. Turns out you were right. I always heard it made newbies stronger, but sure enough, no one can level up while they're on it. I thought making you drink it was for the best, but if you think there's no use for it, I won't blame you for ditching the stuff. Your foundation is strong enough to give goblins or kobolds a run for their money. I could tell from our match a while back, so it might be time for you to start putting on levels.

But don't get full of yourself. When your stats start climbing, you might feel stronger, and you'd be right, but you'd also be dead wrong. Don't forget what I taught you. Stats don't decide who wins or loses. You can have the highest numbers in the world, but everyone bleeds.

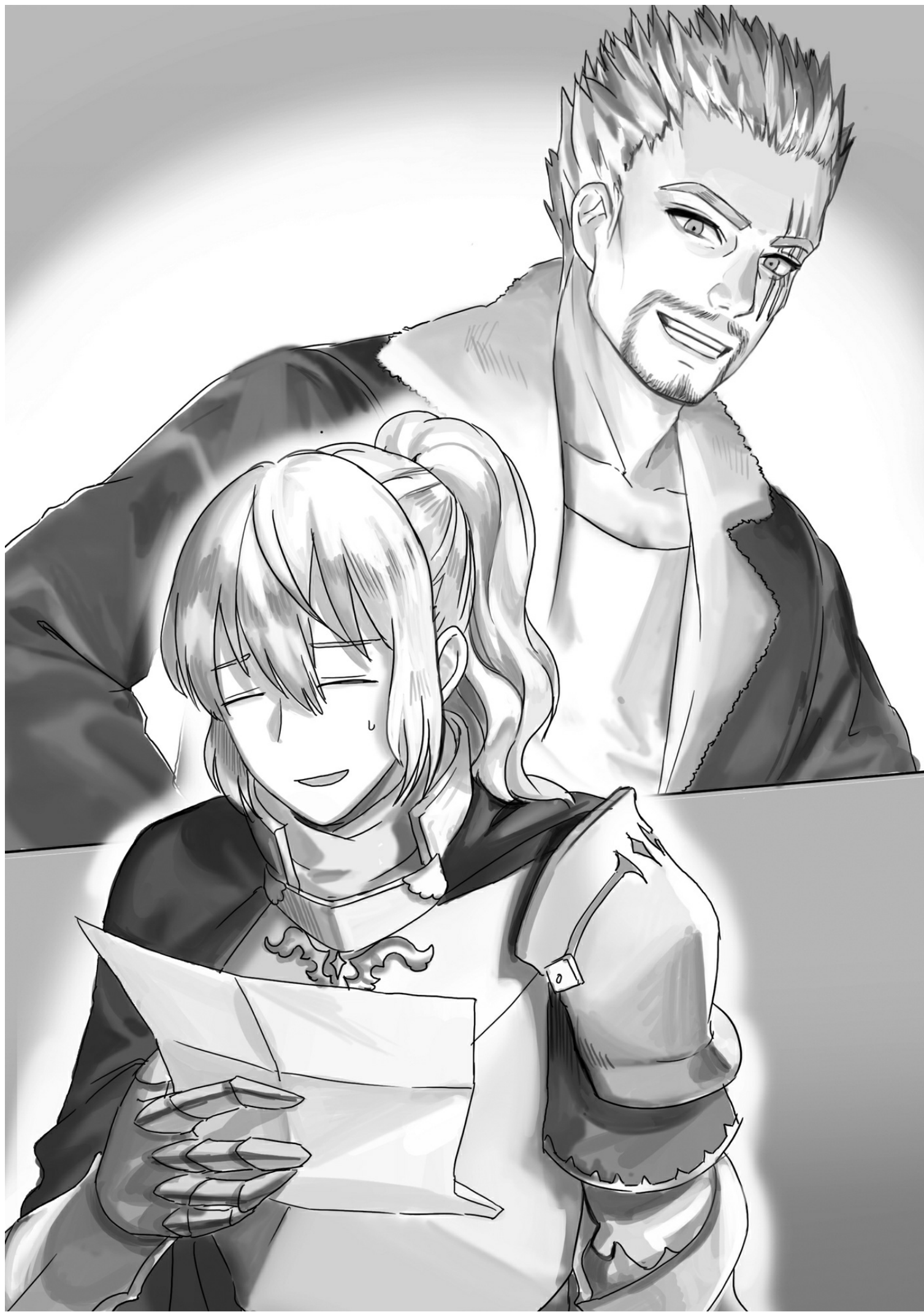
If you're ever up against someone you're equal in strength to, run. The moment you decide to fight, you've made peace with the fact that losing means death. If you somehow pull out a win, keep your head on straight or you might end up losing it.

Next time you feel cocky, come visit us in Merratoni. I'm always ready to take you down a peg. Nanaella and Monica would love to see you too.

Winning a battle comes down to not only preparation but luck, circumstance, and your chemistry with your opponent. That might sound unfair, but save the

whining for when you beat me, you lousy apprentice.

Your favorite master



It sounded like my master needed to find himself a rival in order to use up all the excess energy he was constantly trying to direct my way. There was no way he was avoiding it to save his own hide, right? Next time we met, I'd have to get the truth.

At the time of our most recent match, I'd thought he had simply been beating me to a pulp, but it felt good to know that he'd been judging me as carefully as always. He knew I was the type to let things go to my head and called me out on leveling up well in advance this time. What a swell guy.

Then again, one might call it good fortune that all his letters had been intercepted by the Church in the past, otherwise he would have dragged me back to Merratoni kicking and screaming for "rehabilitation" rather than letting me off the hook so easily. I almost wanted to bow towards Merratoni in reverence to my wise and thoughtful master.

"What are you still doing here, Jord? I'm not going out today."

"Pish-posh, sir! Where's your sense of adventure? Won't you show us lowly folks the wonders of the outside world?"

"'Us'? There are more of you now?"

Jord and his Church-issued robe were already trouble enough, and now he wanted to make it a party? Personally, I preferred *not* to stir the pot so much.

"Me and four other healers, at your command."

"When was I assigned subordinates? I never got that memo."

"The captain of the guard has been recruiting healers who are interested in accompanying you. The competition was stiff, but I managed to snag a spot for myself!"

Having both a personal guard *and* a company of healers was really going to weigh us down as a group. And to be honest, I was a little dubious about people's motives if things were that competitive.

"So, I've got healers joining too? You don't surprise me, Jord, but I've never met these other guys in my life. You think they'll be okay? It's not going to be sunshine and rainbows."

“Not to worry. How about we hit the town?”

“Sure, if you really want to, but I hope you know we’ll be stopping by the Adventurer’s Guild.”

“You wouldn’t dare.”

Jord had become quite perceptive. I hoped the others would be able to similarly adapt.

“Oh, I would. Substance X works wonders for growing as a healer—if you want to, that is.” My companion was silent. “What’s the matter? You look pale.”

“D-Do I? Wow, interesting. Say, I just remembered this thing I’ve gotta do, so, uh, maybe we’ll do that town-hitting another day? Anyway, see ya!”

He bolted from the room and for a moment, I couldn’t contain my laughter. But I quickly refocused myself. I had a year and five months to ready myself as best I could. Above all else, healers relied on holy magic, but I was already fairly confident in my abilities and, on top of that, no stranger to combat. There was one glaring hole that I’d yet to fill in, though: knowledge.

From the basic history of nations to Healer’s Guilds and attitudes towards healers to wealth disparity to religion, I knew next to nothing about this world. Even guild and clinic administrative practices were foreign to me. With so much to learn in so little time, I worried about whether I’d even retain anything.

But first and foremost came the most pressing matter, which was the issue of my horsemanship abilities. It was pretty much a matter of life and death, so Yanbath and Forêt Noire would have to come to my rescue. Forêt was unfit to ride too often, but no other horse even let me near them, let alone hop onto their back.

I’d better stay busy if I want to be able to convince Her Holiness to let me have Forêt.

A thought suddenly came to me. Once Catherine finished choosing the knights who would make up my guard, I’d petition to take them to Merratoni. My master could put them through their paces, and they would foster a sense of solidarity through their shared disgust of Substance X, although we would miss out on training with the Valkyries (assuming they’d even let us).

My final concern was that when we inevitably came across bandits or monsters, I'd need to be ready to kill. I simply wasn't strong enough to subdue someone without maiming them, as frustrating as it was to admit it. And these enemies would not be zombies or ghouls like I'd faced in the labyrinth.

I felt a headache coming on, so I turned my brain off. All that mattered now was doing what I could.

I sat down and started working on my letter home.

The next morning, a knock came at my door as it so often did.

"It's Marluka of the Valkyries, Mister Lulu, sir."

It made me happy that the Valkyries still treated me as they had before my promotion, but I had to wonder if they knew how weird it sounded when they mixed their casual behavior with formalities, especially Marluka. "Lulu"? Really?

"It's open."

The Valkyrie entered, bowed, then said, "Good morning. We must be off for the main field, if it pleases you."

I'd never gotten used to that strange and stiff way of talking, and neither had the girls despite their insistence on using it. Only Lumina spared me the pain.

It surprised me to hear that we weren't heading for the Valkyries' private field today. No one had told me about this yesterday.

"Not the usual grounds?"

"No. Lady Catherine recruited several knights to join your guard for when you set out, but there were more volunteers than anticipated. So you'll be making the final decisions personally."

Oh, lovely. What an *amazing* honor that would be. How were there so many applicants for a job like this? It wasn't going to be a pleasure cruise.

"Does that mean our session's canceled today?"

"Yes, so you can think long and hard about the candidates you choose, *Sir Lulu*," she returned flatly. Was the tension I felt in the air just my imagination?

“Did you see anyone who caught your eye? Anyone on your team’s level?”

“*Please*,” Marluka scoffed, then quieted down to barely a mumble. “If it bothers you that much, why didn’t you just pick us?”

Yep, she was mad. Unless I cleared things up now, I could most likely kiss my training sessions with them goodbye.

“For the record, I wish I could take you all, but your unit is too crucial to the knights, so I’m not allowed to. Come on, Marluka, you know how timid I am.”

“So it was the *captain* who took us out of the running? I don’t believe it!” She wasn’t even trying to be formal anymore. In fact, she’d probably only been behaving that way out of anger.

“I’m sure the higher-ups have their reasons. And you guys are the only regiment I’m even remotely on good terms with. Did you seriously think I was dying to travel the world with these people?”

“Oh, that’s right, you don’t have any other friends because you’re always training with us.”

Well, that was one way to put it. But when she phrased it that way, the excess of volunteers made even less sense. Did knights belong to factions too?

“Please pass it along to the others. Oh, and another thing. You don’t need to act so formal when we’re in private. I’m still technically an honorary Valkyrie to you all.”

“I knew you were a good guy, Lulu. We were planning to beat the snot out of you next training session if you started acting all high and mighty.”

“I’m glad I get to keep my snot. Seriously, you girls...”

The misunderstanding had been resolved and Marluka was back in good spirits. Thank *god*. That hadn’t been some figure of speech. Those ladies would have absolutely beaten me to a pulp. I was surrounded by battle-crazed lunatics.

“‘You girls’ what? Hm? We’re a bunch of battle-crazed lunatics, is that it?”

Clever girl.

“Er, no, I was just wondering why the Valkyries were so different from other regiments.”

“That’s all, huh? Well, fine, I’ll play along. The first priority for all knights is to protect, so no, we aren’t ‘battle-crazed lunatics.’ The Valkyries’ motto just so happens to be ‘The best defense is a good offense.’ Maybe that’s why you feel that way.”

I’d never been fond of that saying... How could a total lack of defensive strategy be considered *good defense*? It felt like a lifetime had passed since I’d last heard the phrase.

“Maybe so.”

“I wonder why the captain asked for volunteers instead of just choosing people,” she mused.

“Because it’s going to be a dangerous mission?”

“I don’t think that’s the only reason, but knowing you, I bet you’ll find yourself some adventurer worth a thousand guards.”

“Maybe...”

The best defense is a good offense. I couldn’t get it out of my mind. Did this world have a history of people being reincarnated here over the years? I’d nearly forgotten that there were supposedly at least nine others like me, since I hadn’t seen or heard anything about them, but maybe that meant it wasn’t even worth worrying about.

“What’s up with you, Lulu?” Marluka leaned forward and looked up at me. “Lumina’s waiting, so let’s get going.”

“Oh, right, sorry,” I replied with my best poker face. Not blushing was just about impossible.

I pushed all thoughts of reincarnation out of my head and followed Marluka to the training field.

We soon reached the grounds. Had I been alone, I would have been hopelessly lost, even with a map.

The knights, the protectors of the Church of Saint Shurule, were already waiting in silence.

“Sorry we’re late,” I said.

“Luciel, stand here with me,” Catherine replied, beckoning.

I stepped up beside her and faced the knights.



“Luciel is an S-rank healer, and he is in need of swords for his guard. This you should already know from my prior explanation.” Her voice rang out loud and clear. “Ideally, I would send him with the Valkyries, but their abilities are far too crucial to the Church’s protection to do without, so they will remain here.”

Shock ran through the assembled Valkyries. *Guess they really didn’t know.* Surprisingly, even the other knights started to stir in the same way. They hadn’t volunteered for guard duty just to hang out with some girls, right? I sure hoped not.

“This mission is not confined to the borders of Shurule. You will be traveling far and wide, to many nations, and as such, this is not a post to be accepted lightly. With that in mind, all who would like to volunteer, step forward.”

The alleged overabundance of ready individuals was nowhere to be seen. Only five templars came to the front.

“These are to be your companions, Luciel, but you could certainly use more. What are your thoughts?”

I looked over the five volunteers and contemplated the situation. The Knights of Shurule were divided into templars and paladins, with each division consisting of four regiments. The Valkyries were one such paladin unit.

Templars were primarily the Church’s guards—protectors—and that was likely why only they had come forward for this mission. Granhart had told me they revered Crya the Divine as well as the deity of healing, and that their loyalty was to the pope before the Church itself. Such individuals weren’t blessed with the knight class at their coming-of-age ceremonies and could only be promoted to the position of templar after pledging their devotion to the divines in front of the pope herself.

The fact that they were the only volunteers really drove home how much the paladins in general hated me. Nearly every one of them were born prodigies, having been given their class directly by Crya at their ceremonies. Their affinities were usually either holy or light magic, and while it was theoretically possible to become a paladin later in life, it was an extremely difficult path to walk.

“The five of you who stepped forward, thank you,” I finally said. “Captain Catherine, would it be possible to have them spar? I’d like to see what they can do.”

“That’s not a bad idea. Volunteers, from this moment on you are under Luciel’s command!”

“Yes, ma’am!” the group replied.

Catherine and I moved away to settle into special seats with a wide view of the field.

“I’m sorry for not letting you take the girls,” she said, lowering her head. She was earnest and knew the pope well, so I felt that I could continue to trust her, even with all the talk of individual factions vying for control.

“No, I understand. You’ve only just been reinstated, and you have a duty to uphold. We still have more than a year left, and that’ll be plenty of time to turn my new unit into a fighting machine.”

“That would certainly be something.”

She might have thought I was joking, but I couldn’t have been more serious. A year of nonstop training with my master would whip them into shape, and my healing made any injuries a non-issue. Okay, maybe constant suffering for the sake of training wasn’t the most mentally healthy approach, but as they say, no pain, no gain.

“Knights,” Catherine called out, “my gratitude for answering my urgent summons. We are about to conduct a mock battle between the templar and paladin divisions, but I want to make it clear that this is not a game. The goal of this exercise is to gauge your abilities, as it is my duty as captain of the guard to ensure that our forces are properly organized. The winners will receive a bonus, and the losers will be penalized.”

The entire forces of the Knights of Shurule, save those on duty, stood at attention.

“194 templars versus 68 paladins. Each division commander, as well as every regiment’s captain, will have a small flag on their helmet. Steal the division

commander's flag and the match is yours. Today we will see if numbers or power will win the day. Remember, this is no mere recruitment screening. This will be our first joint training exercise, so treat it with due sincerity."

"Yes, ma'am!" Their voices were so loud that they shook the air and the ground I stood on, but it wasn't as intimidating from this high up.

"Who do you think will win?" I asked Catherine.

"The paladins, I expect."

She seemed awfully certain despite them being significantly outnumbered. Was the gap between templar and paladin that wide? Or maybe it wasn't the paladins as a whole.

"Because they have the Valkyries?"

"Mm-hm. Without them, the paladins wouldn't stand a chance."

"You seem confident about that."

"Those ladies are incredibly strong."

That definitely explained why I could never hold a candle to any of them in a match.

"Wow, the field looks huge from up here. Which regiments use it?"

"None. It's reserved for joint exercises like this."

"Really? But that's such a waste."

"It's restricted to division captains because regiments used to squabble over it. I heard some of the fights got a little ugly. There were casualties."

I couldn't argue with her. Still, this would've been the perfect place to practice my horse riding. "That makes sense. And I guess the Valkyries are a small regiment compared to the others, so they'd be low on the priority list even if it was available."

"Right, and they don't have any flashy magic to practice either."

"What about me? Could I use the field?"

"Well..." she hesitated. "I'd hate to turn you down, but it really depends on

what you need it for.”

I just so happened to have a valid reason, and technically an indirect order from the pope. “I’m still having trouble riding any horses other than Forêt Noire, so I was thinking I could practice my Riding skill here.”

Catherine chuckled. “That excuse works for me, but I’m not sure it’ll do your horsemanship any good if the horses don’t actually let you mount them.”

“Er, you heard?”

“I sure did. But I *am* under Her Holiness’s orders to accommodate you, so let’s say I’ll give you permission once you can stay on a horse other than your black-haired friend.”

“Yeah, um, that’s fair. Anyway, I guess we should watch the match now.”

“Try not to blink,” she giggled.

Catherine held her hand up, then brought it down, and at once the air was filled with battle cries. I felt the fiery energy seep into me as a knightly passion boiled up on the field.

“They’ve come a long way from the layabouts they used to be,” I marveled.

“I had some whipping to do after Her Holiness reinstated me. Your master was a good example.” A chill ran through the air. “Now I think they’ve finally got a bit of spine again.”

I was captivated by the knights’ ferocity. As the wounded quickly began to fall, Catherine looked on, observing carefully. Meanwhile, I played out simulations in my head; what I might have done if I’d been participating. Would I have been enough of a help to give an edge to the outnumbered side? Perhaps by shoring up their defenses with Area Barrier and reviving casualties with Area High Heal... But would I have been able to manage that much? Would I not have run away or frozen in fear by then?

Suddenly, the scales tipped. The Valkyries overextended themselves on the defending templars’ side and broke through.

“They’re going in pretty far. Do they have a plan or are they getting impatient?”

“They know they have the advantage, so I imagine they’re trying to break the templars’ formation. But they’re being a little too aggressive about it.”

The dual-wielders, Ripnear and Elizabeth, cut a path forward as Lumina and the rest followed behind them. Those poor templars—the power gap was impassable.

“They’re incredible, but I don’t see this lasting much longer.”

“It won’t. It’s just impossible to coordinate with that much power.”

The Valkyries were strong but excessively so, and their bold maneuver allowed the templar captain to retreat. The templars quickly reformed and began a coordinated offensive against the paladins.

“I could always take them off your hands if they’re having trouble cooperating with the other knights,” I offered.

“Nice try. Honestly, though, those girls alone shouldn’t technically be enough to control the match.”

“You look pretty happy about it.”

“They’re my pride and joy. I personally asked Her Holiness to create their troop, and they’re the strongest regiment of all. It just goes to show that they were pouring their sweat and tears into training while the others slacked off.”

“I don’t envy the other units right now. I assume you’re excluding Lumina’s team from the reorganization.”

“Of course.”

The templars quickly broke out of the corner they’d been in since the start of the exercise and overwhelmed the paladin captain. The match was over.

“The templars seem pretty experienced. They consistently had at least three people on every Valkyrie.”

“They played their roles perfectly. I’m interested in knowing how different things might be if you take the field one day.”

“Ha, I think it’s safe to say my regiment would win.”

“Confident about that, hm?”

“As long as there aren’t any ranged attacks, I could be healing nonstop, and Area Barrier would be more than enough to end a stalemate.” On the off-chance there *were* ranged attacks... Well, I probably wouldn’t be fighting in the first place.

“Want to put that to the test?”

“Sorry, but I highly doubt I’ll ever feel the urge to place myself in the middle of a fight unless I absolutely have to. And sparring for self-defense training is different.”

“Suit yourself. Would you mind tending to the injured?”

“Will do.”

Catherine addressed the knights while I went about casting my healing magic. I primarily used Middle Heal (High Heal for a few severe injuries) and its potency was, apparently, unlike that of any normal healer. My patients kept going blank in shock. Naturally, this meant that they’d temporarily stop listening to Catherine, who would promptly rain hellfire down on them.

Five of my patients quickly volunteered to join my guard—two paladins and three more templars. I never thought the Divine Healer’s blessing would make that much of a difference to my magic, but it evidently made me more than average in their eyes.

After I saw to the last of the wounded, Catherine addressed the crowd.

“Congratulations templars. Your reward will come at a later date. For now, let’s discuss how the paladins were defeated. The first step was when the Valkyries overextended themselves and broke formation, and I’m sure many of you believe that is where the sequence ends. However, the captain of the paladins failed to form a strategy or provide proper orders.”

“One moment, please,” the paladin captain interrupted. “With all due respect, didn’t you just say that the *Valkyries* broke formation?”

“By all means, captain, please tell me the strategy they failed to follow. You did issue orders to the knights’ greatest assets and most formidable force, I take it? Or am I wrong and stopping their charge was simply impossible? Forgive me, captain, but I believe it is the leader’s duty to lead.”

“My... My apologies.” The captain stepped back, head bowed.

“Paladins, you’re to do laps around the grounds until this afternoon. But first, Luciel, do you have anything you’d like to say to them?”

“Let’s see. Well...” I paused. “This was my first time seeing an exercise on this scale. The intensity and passion on both sides really blew me away. Thank you for allowing me to witness it.”

“No one caught your eye?”

“Five more people kindly asked to join me earlier, so we’re at a comfortable ten now.”

“Is that enough?”

“More isn’t always better, so I don’t think I’ll need any others. And there are eleven Valkyries too, so it all works out.”

Frankly, compared to the Valkyries, it didn’t matter how many I had on my team. It wouldn’t make a lick of difference. Thankfully, the knights joining me were all fairly young (the oldest seemed to be around thirty), so a year and five months was plenty of time to get them into fighting shape. I’d have to let Master work his magic if I wanted them to rival the Valkyries, though.

“If you say so, but feel free to speak up if you’re after someone in particular. You can have your pick.”

Everyone immediately looked away from me. Catherine couldn’t just up and say that in front of the crowd! Not that I even wanted anyone special. I preferred to keep our morale high and participation voluntary.

“Maybe I’ll see someone who stands out eventually, but I think I’ll make do with these ten for now.”

Catherine turned to the knights. “Did you all hear that? Luciel has no need for you loafers! If that frustrates you, start trying to change his mind! We’ll hold this same exercise monthly, so work at it, train hard, and do your duties. Understood?”

“Yes, ma’am!”

My time with the proud Knights of Shurule at an end, I started to mentally

plan out a meeting between my new guard and Jord's group of healers.

"Ah, that's right, you aren't acquainted with Luciel yet. This would be a good opportunity to ask any questions," Catherine announced to my ten new companions.

"Sorry, what?" *Questions? Catherine, I am not prepared for that.* What was going on in that head of hers? Had her time away from the knights turned it to mush?

A paladin quickly raised his hand. "Sir, may I ask something?"

"Um, sure. Go for it."

"My name is Palaragus. What are your thoughts on medicinals?"

I definitely hadn't been expecting *that* question. And he looked so serious about it that I had to answer sincerely. The problem was, although I'd seen medicinal herbs and such in encyclopedias, I hadn't really given the subject much thought. I knew there was a Doctor's Guild of physicians, but they weren't malicious or particularly interesting. This was a tough one.

Potions came to mind. Those were sort of like medicinals, could heal all manner of wounds, and were a real lifesaver when you were fresh out of magic, so maybe that was what he was getting at.

"I think it's a fascinating field of study. Doctors have given us potions and dedicated years of their lives to researching how to heal people, all without holy magic." It wasn't illegal for healers to use them as well.

"Even an S-rank healer like you uses potions?" Palaragus asked.

"Of course. I use my magic when I can, but if I can't, or if I'm out of energy, I'll never hesitate to down one." I followed my personal creed to a tee: survive, no matter what.

The knights started to make a fuss. I couldn't have said anything *that* weird unless the Healer's and Doctor's Guilds were enemies or something. In which case, this was yet another bit of ignorance that wasn't going to fly once I started traveling. I was putting the Church's authority on the line for the sake of the healers, and ignorance was no one's fault but my own. A bit of schooling would

do me some good.

“Have you studied the subject, sir?” another templar asked.

“No, I’ve just read a few intermediate books on it at an Adventurer’s Guild.”

“An Adventurer’s Guild? The rumors say you used to live at one, but why would you, a healer, do something like that?”

Word sure got around. No harm in coming clean, though.

“I’m surprised you know that. Well, to be honest, I was terrified of seeing adventurers walking around with weapons everywhere, and I wanted to learn how to defend myself.”

“So you went to the Adventurer’s Guild alone? By yourself?”

Everyone stared at me in utter disbelief. What was so weird about that? If living at an Adventurer’s Guild really was that strange, I must have been one lucky guy.

Actually, this entire discussion—me and a bunch of knights shooting the breeze in a huge training field—was stranger than anything else thus far. I locked eyes with Lumina, who smiled and nodded in greeting. I wondered if she’d worried about me after leaving Merratoni back when we’d first met, then immediately felt my face go warm.

“Yep, by myself. At the time, I didn’t know that adventurers hated healers, so I guess you could call it dumb luck that things worked out. No one trusted me at first until they saw how hard I trained. But everyone got sick of me not knowing things, so they started teaching me stuff, and that’s where I first read about medicine. Just don’t expect me to be able to make anything myself.”

“I see,” Palaragus replied. “Thank you for answering my question. I feel like I understand you a little better now.”

Really, all that anyone needed to understand me was a mug of Substance X.

“I’m an open book, so ask me anything any time.”

Something didn’t feel right. I was so used to people’s gazes being filled with discontent, but now they looked almost sympathetic and gentle.

“If there are no more questions, the paladins have laps to run,” Catherine ordered. “Templars, I expect you all to continue training diligently. This concludes today’s joint exercise. You’re dismissed.”

I now had a unit of ten knights, a party of five healers, and absolutely no idea what to do with them. I’d have felt awful letting them sit around and do nothing, though, so I decided to consult Granhart. He seemed like the right person to turn to for matters of leadership.

03 — Joint Exercises with the Valkyries

I gave my team leave until dinnertime and stopped by Granhart's quarters to explain the situation.

"...so, basically, I've suddenly got ten knights and five healers under my command," I concluded.

"I see. And what are you looking to do, exactly?" the priest replied.

That was a good question. I didn't even know what I *needed* to do, let alone what I *wanted*, so Her Holiness's orders were all I had to go on.

"The pope gave me a year and five months to prepare myself, but the problem is that I don't have any actual responsibilities as an S-rank healer, which means my team doesn't either. I'm worried that I'll end up wasting our time dawdling."

Doing nothing was definitely an appealing option but would do none of us any good in the long run. At the same time, keeping my new subordinates on duty every hour of every day didn't sound like much fun either.

"I understand that your position has risen quickly and your thoughts must be rife with worry since becoming a leader, but you must calm yourself."

"Yeah, you're right."

"You don't necessarily need to oversee your subordinates at all times. Try to recall when you first became an exorcist. The extent of my involvement was providing your robe and elevator card."

True. I also remembered Jord teaching me at least some of the ropes, but other than that, I'd been on my own. My team wasn't diving into labyrinths, though, so I wasn't keen on following that example.

"Maybe I should take them down to the labyrinth. Oh, and what do I do about their pay?"

"Pay? The Church will compensate them as usual. Nothing is required of you in that regard. However, I must mention that escorts are forbidden to enter the

labyrinth.”

All those hours worrying about how in the world I was going to provide for them wasted...

“Oh, okay, but otherwise we’re allowed to act independently, right?”

“Within Headquarters, yes. If you want to travel outside the city, you will need Her Holiness’s permission, so I recommend that you make such requests in advance.”

“Wait, how do you...” Since when did Granhart have a mind-reading skill?

“Jord was my own subordinate for many years, and he wears his emotions on his sleeve. I know what it is he dreams of.”

Oh, he meant Jord, not me. “Jord has dreams?”

“To travel the world. I imagine that is what motivated him to join you.”

So much for privacy. Jord had probably told Granhart about me wanting to go back to Merratoni at some point, though. The two of them seemed connected in a way that I wasn’t. Granhart might have been about as flexible—and half as emotional—as a piece of wood, but he was a man with a sense of duty. I wondered if we’d ever get to chat as friends someday, as tense a conversation as it would likely be.

“Interesting,” I commented. “S-rank healers do have to travel, after all. Do you know why that is?”

“Simple. To be a beacon of hope for those in parts of the world that lack Healer’s Guilds. To expose corruption in places that don’t. To show the people that we, the Church of Saint Shurule, are here for them.”

I could go around healing people all day, but asking me to expose corruption was a bit much. That “being hope” bit, though... That would be easy with Extra Heal. If I was allowed to use it, that is.

“How do we handle compensation in places without guilds? Do we heal for free or maybe in exchange for food or something?”

“Yes, but do be cautious as those practices are banned elsewhere.”

“What about in slums, where people can’t afford it?”

“Please treat it as you do your monthly healings here, something like a special event, or conduct your operations outside the city. Just keep it subtle. The local clinics will object either way.”

“You’re always a huge help, Mister Granhart. Do you mind if I come to you for advice again at some point?”

“Not at all.”

I had struggled to get a good read on the guy at first, but Granhart was an exceptional listener and advisor. As soon as I was able to stop mistrusting everyone, I knew that he’d make a great personal confidant.

I had a quick lunch, then dropped in to see Lumina.

“Good afternoon, Lumina. You must be exhausted after all that running. Care for a Heal?”

“No, but thank you. I wasn’t expecting to run laps this morning. I’ve so much work to get to now.”

I’d better make this quick, then. “Oh, I’m sorry to keep you, but I wanted to ask you something, if that’s okay.”

“It’s not often that you make requests. What could it be?”

“We have our training session tomorrow morning, right? How would you feel about me bringing my new team along with me?”

“The knights who joined you, you mean?”

“Right. And five healers.”

Lumina considered it for a moment. “May I ask why?”

Not the best reaction, but I’d seen worse. “Honestly, because they’re weak. I can’t leave my life in their hands with the way they are now.”

“I wish I could help you, but I simply can’t slow our progress for the sake of your own.”

“What if I buffed them with Area Barrier and kept them healed? That’d make

them decent training partners, right?”

“That it would, but then the burden falls on you. You’re okay with that?”

“Of course. I’m planning on having them give you girls a run for your money one of these days.”

“Oh, are you? In that case, we’ll see you tomorrow morning. But don’t expect it to continue if it doesn’t prove worth our time.”

“I wouldn’t ask that of you. Thank you for giving us a chance. Please let me know if I can ever return the favor.”

“Actually, I may just have something.”

“Oh? How can I help?”

“I want to rewrite the ladies’ reports—make them somewhat presentable.”

Either Lumina was asking me to commit perjury or the Valkyries were terrible writers. There was only one way to find out.

“I’ll get right on that. I assume these reports should all follow the same format. If you have any you’ve submitted that have been accepted before, could I see them too? They’ll be good references.”

“You’ve done some maturing since we first met. I’ll leave it in your hands.”

“I’ll have them back to you soon.”

As I skimmed through the Valkyries’ reports it became increasingly clear to me that there was no standardization whatsoever. They were all over the place, so I proposed making a template to Lumina, who enthusiastically accepted the offer.

Afterwards, I headed off to meet my team for dinner, spirits high after securing our training session.

What awaited me at the dining hall was a most unusual sight.

“It’s always a bit awkward eating with people you aren’t used to, huh?” I said to my fifteen companions with a nervous smile.

No reply came. Jord was usually the tension-breaker, but for some reason, he

was more on edge than anyone, leaving me stranded and alone. I had to do something. Sheesh, it was like someone had died here.

“Anyway, let me thank you all for your boldness in choosing to join a random newcomer like me. To be frank, it still hasn’t quite hit me that I’m an S-ranker. I mean, I trained at an Adventurer’s Guild and then spent years fighting in a labyrinth, so I don’t really feel like a healer at all.”

I smiled and looked around at everyone. Still no response. *Tough crowd.*

“I want to one day be able to repay your dedication, but until then I’m going to do everything I can to at least live up to your expectations.” I bowed and finally got a reaction other than deafening silence.

“Sir, you mustn’t bow to us!”

“You’ve made your point; now raise your head!”

Even Jord’s anxiety had been blown away in shock. “Listen to them, sir. No one here’s used to your usual antics.”

“Well, I’m sorry, but I was expecting you to help me out, not be stiff as a board the whole time.”

“You’re right. I’m sorry.”

“No apologies. The floor’s yours.”

“Right, um, hey. My name’s Jord. I’m a healer...”

The rest of the healers and knights soon followed Jord’s introduction with their own. With that out of the way, I changed the subject.

“We’re supposed to be traveling abroad to all the Healer’s Guilds around the world, but by my understanding, not every country is as developed as Saint Shurule. Thankfully, Her Holiness has given us a year and five months to prepare. That’s plenty of time to put everyone through their paces, and that’s just what I’m going to do.”

“I haven’t heard about this before. What exactly are we doing?” one of my new comrades asked.

I didn’t feel like explaining every single detail, but I was sure that Jord would

get the hint. “A lot of you are probably going to get used to passing out pretty soon, but it’ll serve to make everyone stronger. I need your trust on this.”

“Sir, don’t tell me these ‘paces’ you’re going to put us through involve going to the Adventurer’s Guild,” my friend pleaded.

“You bet it does,” I replied. “Now, early tomorrow morning we have our first training session, and I don’t want anyone to be late.”

“Where are we gathering?” another team member asked.

I smiled. “In front of the Valkyries’ personal training grounds. We’ll be joining them.”

Finally, my funeral procession of a team started to beam. Their full attention was on me now, their replies spirited and frequent. The power of the Valkyries’ popularity amazed me, although I was slightly concerned about everyone suddenly acting like adolescents. I prayed that our joint training session wouldn’t break them too much.

Our joint training session would, in fact, not break them much at all.

The next day, we organized a match between my unit and the Valkyries to test the waters. Seeing as I was the only healer with combat training, the others were acting as standby medics. We took our places about thirty meters apart, and I decided to precede the fight with a few sparks.

“Get ready, Valkyries, because today’s your last day as the strongest of the knights.”

“You think we’ll lose to a team of infants that’s hardly learned to walk? Luciel, you *must* have lost your senses.”

Lumina’s sheer and utter exasperation stabbed me right through the heart, but I held it together.

“If you’re so sure, why not make it interesting? If we win, you all owe us a favor.”

“Very well. I won’t fault you for dreaming.”

I’d known she would say that. Lumina clearly didn’t have much experience on

the verbal battlefield, because she'd just given my team a nice morale boost.

"Did you hear that?" I called out to my team. "I'm only here for support. It's up to all of you to make the victory ours!"

"Yes, sir!" they cried.

I cast Area Barrier, which, combined with their zeal, created a veritable wall of defense. They knew that I was there to heal and back them up. It was all up to them now.

As an aside, I'd told them they might just get to take the girls out on a date, which I somewhat regretted after seeing how intense it made them. *Note to self: maybe don't use the Valkyries as bait.*

Our opponents suddenly flew into action. After all the thought I'd given to what their strategy would end up being, I was surprised to see them fall back on brute force. They were underestimating us.

"Palaragus, Piazza, stick together and stay on the offensive! Templars, focus on defense!"

"Sir!" the team answered.

Swords began to clash almost immediately, with Ripnear and Elizabeth leading their pack just like the day before. The dual-wielders rained down a flurry of blows, never letting an opening go to waste, while the templars defended against the brunt of their assault.

The line of templars tilted their heads in confusion when Kathy, Marluka, and Gannet suddenly added their swords and shields to the attack, but my guard held its composure and stood its ground.

I sensed impatience from Kathy's group. Just then, Beatrice, the spear-wielder, let out a sharp cry of pain. As strong as the Valkyries were, both Palaragus and Piazza were paladins, and they had greatly heightened defenses. Taking them both on at once had been too much.

The Valkyries started to slip. Palaragus parried Saran's massive greatsword, and Piazza put his blade to her neck. With two of their teammates already dispatched, the women were losing their edge, but their captain stood firm.

“Hold fast! They only have the advantage as long as their defenses are being enhanced! Force Luciel into the open, and stay in groups!”

The nimble Queena, wielding her rapier, and Myla, with her naginata, tag-teamed one of the templars. I quickly cast Middle Heal as they came down on him, giving the knight a chance to counterattack. He hit back hard—maybe a little *too* hard. I cast High Heal on the two Valkyries as well, just in case, then had them retire.

Our team went on the offensive, and the fighting intensified. The templars paired up and took down the panicked paladins one after another. But something about the whole thing felt off. The women we were making such quick work of simply weren’t the Valkyries, the mightiest that the ranks of the knights had to offer, even considering our increased defenses. On top of that, Lumina hadn’t stepped into the fray once. It was like she knew that she had us in the palm of her hand.

Eventually, only Lucy and Lumina remained, and the former had run out of enough magic to perform her healing role, so she quickly retired. And then I understood what was going on.

“Lumina, we’re fighting with everything we have. Can’t you guys do the same?” I asked sharply. “I hope your plan isn’t to steamroll us by yourself, because I *just* found these guys. I’d prefer to keep their dignity intact.”

My guard stared at me in confusion, and with good reason. I was really raining on everyone’s parade just as we were winning, but this wasn’t what the Valkyries were made of. Their guilty expressions told me everything I needed to know.

“I’m sorry, Luciel. I am. But I swear to you there’s a reason for it.”

“Are you allowed to tell me what that reason is?”

Winning this easily would only inflate everyone’s egos, and I wanted to make them the strongest, to train them strictly and properly on the miniscule chance that we ever found ourselves inside a labyrinth. It was too early for them to be getting full of themselves.

“I’ve disrespected you when I should have spoken of this earlier. You deserve

an explanation.”

“You were obviously holding back.”

Lumina nodded gently. “We’re under orders to restrict our use of skills like Physical Enhancement while training with other regiments.”

“To keep you from overtaking everyone else?”

“Yes. But I want you to know that in spite of that, we gave this match everything.”

It sure didn’t feel like they had restricted much of anything when *I’d* fought with them. The other knights must have really been slacking if the Valkyries had still managed to run circles around them.

I sighed. “Who’s the wise guy who even came up with that idea?”

“Lady Catherine, Luciel. Please don’t make a mountain out of a molehill.”

“Well, I mean, if everyone stopped relying on Physical Enhancement, focused on actual training more, and learned to cooperate, we wouldn’t have these issues.”

“I know, Luciel, believe me. I’ve thought much the same more times than I can count.”

I sympathized with her, but now I wasn’t sure what the solution was. If Lumina went all out, we’d lose and the team’s morale would be toast. And if the team’s morale was toast, that meant getting Substance X down their throats would be that much harder. Without a carrot to dangle, they wouldn’t run.

Good thing I knew how to bargain.

“All right, I understand your position now. Do you remember what we talked about before the match, though?”

“Yes, I believe we were to owe you a favor if we lost.”

“Right. See, originally, that was going to be you guys going on a date with everyone, but that doesn’t seem fair to force on you when you couldn’t go all out. So how about we all have a casual lunch together sometime instead?”

Everyone on my team turned to look at Lumina in unison, their eyes filled

with apprehensive hope.

“Um...” She turned to the Valkyries. “We can make that work.”

The men exploded and cried out with joy.

“Thank you,” I said, filled with relief, and steeled my resolve. This casual lunch was not going to happen any time soon. It was too perfect and enticing a reward to let it go to waste so quickly. There would be no escape from Substance X.

After that, the Valkyries promptly beat the hell out of us by using all their abilities, but I’d never forget the smiles my team left the training ground with.

Catherine asked for me just after our session came to an end.

“Have you been in the labyrinth recently?” she asked.

“Not since I got back.”

“Her Holiness has been a little concerned about it, if you wouldn’t mind looking around for any changes down there.”

This was actually the perfect chance to try to level up. I’d been holding off on Substance X for a while to test that out.

“Sure thing. Should I report to you or the pope?”

“Her Holiness, if you please.”

“Got it.”

I made for the dining hall to grab breakfast, hoping to eat with Lumina or the team, but everyone had already left. Eating alone felt so strange these days. I almost always had someone to join me lately.

After a lonely breakfast, I went on down to the labyrinth.

04 — Level-Ups and More Old Guys

The labyrinth celebrated my return with a lovely baptism of absolute garbage that burned my nostrils. It sure was good to be back.

I quickly noticed that something was different during my patrol of the first floor.

“No zombies? Weird.”

The walking corpses that had never been shy in the past were nowhere to be seen, which was strange because no one had been there to thin them out.

I continued searching for some time, then gave up and descended to the second floor, but again came up empty. More miasma meant more monsters, though, so I continued to the third floor. At last, I found a wandering group of zombies and skeletons. I summoned my Holy Dragon spear from my magic bag, but the creatures wouldn't get close enough, so I dispatched them with Purification.

As I watched them fade away, I realized that I no longer took satisfaction in defeating them. How in the world had past-me been able to hold it together? I had conquered a *labyrinth*. In retrospect, that was kind of insane, although it was a little irresponsible of me to have flat out ignored the place after that.

Not even a month had gone by since then, but I wasn't the type to focus on past glories. There was way too much that needed doing; I couldn't waste time looking back. Dwelling on things only forced me to remember the dragon, and you couldn't pay me to go anywhere near another one of those. I was going to live a peaceful life, no matter what it took. I couldn't rely on the Church for comfort if they ever let me go, even being at S-rank. Like they say, you get as much out of life as you put into it.

I had covered a decent amount of the labyrinth and had just decided to head back when I thought of my level. Just to be sure, I opened my status screen.

Name: Luciel

Job: Healer IX — Holy Dragoon I

Age: 19

Level: 2

HP: 890 — MP: 590

STR: 158 — VIT: 169

DEX: 143 — AGI: 145

INT: 176 — MGI: 190

RMG: 182 — SP: 2

“Seriously? That one fight was enough to level up?” I couldn’t help but wonder how high my level would’ve been if I had stopped drinking Substance X when I’d first arrived in the Holy City.

My HP, MP, and other attributes had jumped up a few points, while my SP had gone up by just two. The Protection of the God of Fate gave a boost to the latter, which likely meant that a normal level-up provided either one skill point or none at all.

I looked up at the ceiling for a divine answer from my protector himself, then remembered my master’s words. Stats were only a general concept. There was no point getting caught up in the numbers, so I closed the screen. But the restlessness—as well as this newfound reluctance to fight the undead—still wouldn’t settle.

I quickly got moving to clear my head. Fortunately (or unfortunately?), there were so few monsters on these higher floors that it took considerable effort to even find more enemies. When I finally did, they moved so slowly that taking them out was practically effortless, which didn’t help the strange sense of guilt I felt in doing so.

I decided to head for the boss room on the tenth floor and was met with almost no resistance along the way. The labyrinth seemed to be on its last legs. Upon entering the first boss room, barely half of the usual monsters appeared.

I felt my guilt fade to the back of my mind. For some reason, as I tore through

their ranks with the Holy Dragon spear and a holy silver sword, my hesitation vanished. One moment of uncertainty around enemies that were after your life could mean death, and I would never have forgiven myself if I'd done something so stupid.

By the time I finished, I had reached level five but didn't feel a bit stronger. I figured I would have to spar with someone if I wanted to really see the results. With plenty to report to Her Holiness, I had turned to leave when my body suddenly felt like lead. It finally occurred to me just how tense I'd been the entire time.

I broke into a nervous smile. Until only a month or so ago I'd been practically *living* in mortal peril, my emotions numb, and now I wasn't sure whether I'd be able to handle it again. Danger and traveling the world went hand in hand, though, so I would have to.

I figured I'd better make time to come down to the labyrinth every now and then in order to stay prepared.

On my way out, my level jumped up to six, putting my SP at ten. I looked through possible skills to spend the new points on and found quite a few more handy-looking options than expected: Scouting, Perception, Stealth, Magic Concealment, Presence Concealment, Magic Occlusion, and so on. I even spotted Monsieur Luck's older brother, Supreme Luck (Sir Preme Luck?), who I desperately wanted to meet, but he wouldn't budge for anything less than a hundred SP, a sum I wouldn't reach for at least another forty-five levels.

"Gah, I really blew it."

"Blew what?"

I looked up to see Catherine waiting for me just outside the entrance with an eyebrow raised.

"What are you doing here?" I asked once I had stopped cringing at myself. "Need something?"

"Nope. You have visitors."

I looked into the shop with her. Inside stood a short yet muscular bearded

man and a beastperson with pointy, upturned lips and sharp eyes—a dwarf and fox-man, by my guess. What did they want with me? How had a dwarf and beastperson waltzed into Church Headquarters, the seat of human supremacy? For that matter, what were they doing in front of the Church’s most well-kept secret? Clearly there was more to these two than met the eye.

I couldn’t take my gaze off them and summarized my intense confusion thusly: “Is this, like, allowed?”

“Yes, it’s fine.” Catherine smiled gently. “They’re long-time friends of the Church and know how to keep a secret.”

With those words, she had assuaged my concerns, but I still had no idea what they were there for.

“Oh, okay. Who are they?”

“Grand, the dwarven blacksmith, and Trett, the fox-man magic artificer. You might have heard of them.”

Sorry, Catherine, but those names might as well be Greek to me. Way to make things awkward. “It’s nice to meet you both. I’m Luciel. Healer. And I’m sorry, but I’m a bit out of the loop, so I can’t say I’ve heard of either of you.”

“Honest. I like that,” the dwarf replied. “The name’s Grand and I’m a blacksmith by trade. I make armor and weapons for the knights here. You see it, it probably came outta my forge. And you. You don’t look like any healer I know. Maybe a knight.”

Wow, talk about being in the presence of greatness. I owed more than a lot to this guy. Without his equipment, I’d have been dead meat at the first boss room.

“Oh-ho,” the fox-man cooed, “my goodness you look so handsome in that armor. Oh, you can call me Trett. I make robes for the Church, just like the one you’ve got on. But my, look at you. That’s no healer’s body, no sir.”

Would you look at that? Another person I owed my life to. Would it have killed Catherine to have told me they were coming?

“I’m so glad to finally meet you two,” I answered. “I wouldn’t be here without

your work, and I've wanted to thank you for so long. Also, am I allowed to ask why you guys are feeling me up?"

The men, shamelessly and with absolutely no regard for my gratitude, were fondling every inch of my body. Call me crazy, but it made me a little uncomfortable. Just as I was about to protest, I locked eyes with Catherine, who smiled and silently mouthed the words, "Don't you move."

"'Luciel' you said your name was? We're checking your posture and muscles," Grand explained. "Gonna make you a set o' your own personal gear."

"Wait, really?" Hold the phone, since when was that a thing? Was Catherine ever planning on telling me? Or Her Holiness? Had they simply forgotten to mention it?

"Mm-hm. I'm not rubbing that cute tush of yours just because I want to," Trett said. "We're here on *business*."

No. Just no. What robe-making purpose could groping my thighs and butt—and so gently—possibly serve? "Business," my foot!

Before I could get uppity about it, Catherine pinned me with an icy glare. "Of course. Carry on."

The ordeal lasted for over ten minutes and put me through many different poses.

"Guy's a bit weird, but his build's not bad, Cattleya. If he keeps trainin', bet he'll be the strongest healer out there."

"Cattleya, dear, what will his things be made of?"

Did they just call Catherine "Cattleya"? And hold on, do we not even have the materials yet?

"Something I'm sure neither of you have ever worked with before. Frankly, I think what Luciel has might be too much for you to handle," she said, taunting them with a smug look.

What was she doing provoking these two? She couldn't have been a supremacist, so what was her deal? In an instant, all semblance of calm vanished into the ether, replaced by fire and sparks in the air. The craftsmen's

glares shifted to me.

She just *had* to say something. The only special materials I could think of that I had were my Holy Dragon fangs and scales, but I didn't even know if I was allowed to hand those over. I looked towards Catherine, and she nodded back.

Grand's and Trett's gazes continued to bore holes into me, their eyes screaming at me to cough up the goods. One could learn a lot from the looks in people's eyes, and in this case I learned a fair bit about myself... Specifically, how badly I wanted to run away.

"Do we have permission from Her Holiness?" I asked Catherine, swallowing my complaints.

"Of course. They wouldn't be here otherwise."

Personally, I liked Shop-Catherine more than Knight-Catherine.

"Okay, here's what I have." I gave some scales to Trett and fangs to Grand. Their fury instantly abated, and they beamed at me but then quickly started to frown.

My curiosity got the better of me. "Is something wrong?"

"These aren't from just any dragon, are they? These are legendary," Grand marveled. "Dunno what some healer's doin' with stuff like this, but I don't really give a damn. I've never even laid eyes on materials this valuable. Can't waste them."

"Absolutely," Trett crooned. "All craftsmen dream of an opportunity like this. Hoh, dear, but will my talents be enough for this? I'm not so sure."

Now, that was a good point. Asking them to craft items with legendary materials that they'd never worked with before came with a high risk of failure. The shock and awe they felt must have been on par with the emotions I'd experienced upon first seeing the Holy Dragon himself.

To my credit, these two had a way to bow out. I had not had that luxury. And these guys had more than one shot to succeed.

"Don't worry. If you mess up, I've got plenty of extras." I showed them several more fangs and scales. The men began to tremble.

“Next time, lead with that!” they shouted, but their fury quickly lost to childlike excitement. Eager grins spread across their faces. They terrified me as people, but as craftsmen they were first-rate, and I must have offended them.

“We’re goin’ to the forges, Luciel.”

“Cattleya, be a dear and let us borrow him, would you?”

The two clamped onto my arms and started to drag me away.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, hold on! I don’t have time to just up and disappear! Tell me where your shop is and I’ll stop by later.” I tried to struggle, but their grips were harder than iron. I couldn’t budge.

Jord and my team still needed me, to say nothing of the rumors that would arise if I let these two drag me around town. But my captors functioned on a fundamentally different level of thought.

“Where is it? In Rockford, of course!” they said in unison.

“Excuse me? Uh, Catherine? A little help?”

She giggled. “Now, don’t be unreasonable, you two. He’s under the Church’s protection. I can’t just let you take him home with you.”

They clicked their tongues in frustration. I couldn’t make heads or tails of the pair. How serious had they been about trying to abduct me?

Catherine suddenly shot a meaningful glance my way. I had a very bad feeling but was powerless to stop the coming tragedy.

“I did expect this, however,” she announced. “So I found you a local smithy where you can get straight to work.”

“Huh?” Grand grunted. “Well, say so sooner! I do remember there bein’ adamantite forges here, and I got the time, so, eh, I’ll bite.”

“Oh-ho, I can’t wait to get started,” Trett added fawningly.

I might as well not have been there. “Hey, Catherine, I still have my team to get back to and details to work out with the Valkyries.”

“Listen, these men are extremely busy people, Luciel. And you’ll be right here in the city, so you can leave your guard behind.”

Then maybe we could nix the double standards and let me go out without an escort *all the time*? Or was that asking too much? I got the feeling Catherine had masterminded this entire situation.

As we made our way to the smithy with Catherine as my substitute personal guard and the craftsmen on each of my arms, I heard people whispering something about Saint Weirdo leaning a certain way. The fires that had been started during Master's visit when he and the others had paraded me through town were instantly rekindled.

That is until I met the eyes of those passing by. Then the people understood my pain, saw that I was being dragged against my will. They still ignored me, though. I may have averted their doubts about the nature of my sexuality, but at what cost?

I would only learn of the damage done some time later, of the whisperings that had begun to stir. Whisperings of Saint Weirdo's growing harem of old, pining men.

This would become one of many reasons for my need to set out from the Holy City, but that's a story for another time.

05 — Legendary Craftsmen

We reached the smithy and a multitude of employees came out and bowed. Not to me, but to Grand and Trett. The arrival of such distinguished figures had sent the local workshop into a bit of a frenzy. These men were no mere artisans in their craft—they were straight-up superstars.

I turned to Catherine. “They’re *that* famous?”

They didn’t seem like anything more than a regular old dwarf and a weird fox-man to me, but I’d never met any others, to be fair. I lacked any points of comparison to confirm my biases.

“Did you think I was joking?” she asked. “They’re *extremely* famous. Grand’s the master of the Commerce Guild in Rockford, a little haven for craftsmen and artisans, and he’s one of the greatest blacksmiths you’ll ever find.”

And one of the most handsy, I thought. “Why is someone like that personally making my gear?”

“You can thank Her Holiness for that. Grand’s awfully fond of you now for proving that his work can take a healer through a labyrinth.”

“I can’t be the first one to have done that.” Either I was the first healer to ever use his equipment or Grand had a memory problem.

Catherine grinned and nodded to the dwarf. “Ask him yourself. Now, about Trett, he’s not just an expert artificer, his entire family comes from a line of master tailors. He’s one of the only five people in the world who can make that angel’s pillow you have.”

“Seriously?! He makes those? I don’t think I’ll ever be able to sleep without one anymore! Oh, uh, my bad. I should dial it back a bit.”

Unfortunately for Grand, Trett had just won me over. I wondered what other fanciful sleeping aides he was able to weave.

“I understand the feeling. I use one myself. Works wonders, doesn’t it?”

“It sure does. Don’t tell me he’s got more than that up his sleeve.”

“I hear he has a diverse skill set, but good luck to most people with finding an appointment given how many clients he has around the world. You’re one lucky guy, Luciel.”

It was all Monsieur Luck’s doing. Anything and everything seemed to go my way, thanks to him. I’d begun to doubt his presence lately, but now I knew that was probably just tough love. I couldn’t rely on the good Monsieur for everything or else my luck just might come back to bite me one of these days.

“Man, there are so many talented people everywhere I go.”

“You’re one of them, you know. Have some confidence in yourself.”

I shivered at the thought. Undead monsters I could handle. People? Not so much. Catherine gave me way too much credit. Somehow, that put my mind at ease.

“You know, I’m still terrified of fighting. I’m just an average guy with a knack for holy magic,” I said. “Nothing special.”

“I’m not sure an average guy could conquer a labyrinth.”

“All I want is to lead a peaceful life. Please. That’s it.”

“You do that.” Catherine smiled. My wish couldn’t have been *that* unfeasible.

“I will.”

The fuss over Grand and Trett finally died down, and the two immediately got to taking my measurements.

“Bring the sword down slow,” Grand instructed, “like you always do.”

“Like this?”

“Stop. Hold it there.”

Grand took some measurements while I held the pose, then studied my range of motion to get me fitted just right. Next, we had to determine where to weave the magic circle for maximum effect, and once that was done, they put me through some tests and adjusted their notes accordingly. All things considered, the process went smoothly. Silly me for assuming it meant I’d be out of there quickly, though.

I repeated their instructed movements over and over as they checked and double-checked for errors to the point where I was starting to feel like a mindless golem. Only when I'd reached the end of my rope was I finally released. I'd never have managed to see the whole thing through if it hadn't been for the sincerity in their eyes, which spoke of the passion they put into even the most trivial aspects of their work.

"Welcome back," Catherine said. "You were starting to look a little vacant there after a while, but you made it through."

"It sure feels nice being able to move however I want again," I joked. "Whoa, it's already dark out. I should really get going."

I wasn't worried about a curfew, and I was an adult who could wander the night as I pleased, but I'd left my team for longer than I had planned. They could have very well been sitting around waiting to hear back from me.

However, the dwarf craftsman, who had just finished his work, had something different in mind.

"Now, don't be a killjoy. We're goin' for drinks, and you're gonna tell me all about what kinda weapons you like."

"Oh-ho, there's an idea," Trett added. "You young men are always such dreamers, and I'd love to hear your ideas. Join us, won't you, Cattleya?"

"Who, me? Oh, all right. Just for a bit, though," she replied with (poorly) feigned reluctance.

Off we went into the night, the two old men flanking me with iron grips once more.

We came to a small, folksy kind of bar-restaurant.

"Wow, it's so cozy here," I commented.

"Damn right." Grand beamed. "You're sittin' in the only place in the whole city you'll ever find me having a drink."

I wouldn't have gone *that* far. The blacksmith must have had some history with the place.

“Something special about it?”

“Special? This here’s where I became a craftsman.”

“You weren’t always one? What was your first goal, to be a chef?”

He guffawed. “Nah, no ovens for me. Least not cookin’ ones. Back in those days, I was just a greenhorn smith, could barely hold a hammer. Barely made enough coin to eat. But the old guy used to run this place kept buyin’ my knives, those cruddy old things.”

“Sounds like an eccentric person.”

“That he was. Kept on buyin’ and buyin’ my shoddy work like it were his favorite thing to do. So I asked him why, and you know what he tells me?”

For the future of the art? Because they were still usable? “Not a clue.”

““Why, I have the privilege of using knives made by the hands of the future greatest blacksmith in the world. Still, I’d love to feast my eyes on work you’re truly passionate about,” he said. Couldn’t look ‘im in the eye, I was so embarrassed. The way he smiled at me. That’s when I swore to him I’d never let a single half-assed piece o’ metal outta my forge again.”

I could see why Grand felt so indebted to this man. It took someone special to push you to be not only the best but the best that *you*, specifically, could be.

“That’s amazing. What about you caught his eye?”

““Cause I never hid how shit my knives were. I consider myself lucky I got to meet the guy.”

Grand’s honesty struck a chord with me. Whether my meeting with these two weirdos was a good or bad thing was entirely up to me and depended on what I did with it. It just might have been something special, but I kept those thoughts to myself.

“I’m looking forward to seeing what new gear you two can whip up.”

“You’d better! We’re gonna hammer out stuff worthy o’ legends with those materials. Where’s your glass? We gotta toast!”

“Oh, I’m sorry, but I actually promised my master that my first drink would be

with him. He's the guildmaster of the Adventurer's Guild in Merratoni."

Grand stared hard at me for a few seconds, then burst out laughing. "Sharin' a pint with your master in this day and age? I like you, kid! Right, you have that drink with him, then it's my turn. We'll do it next time you need your gear fixed up."

"Goodness, care to share some of that fun you're having?" Trett whined.

"I'd love to join, if there's room," Catherine added.

With the addition of a sober (yet no less rambunctious) Trett and Catherine, our nice, cozy atmosphere went right out the door. Their sobriety didn't last for long, and the drunks excitedly pounded my back all through the night. There would be many casts of Heal that evening.

06 — Lord Reinstar

My colleague and superior was packing his things.

“You’re really leaving the company, sir?”

“Well, I’ve done what I set out to do. You still worry me, though.”

I was dreaming. Of memories I wished I could forget but never would.

“I’ll be fine. I always pull through in the end.”

He sighed. “It’s good to be positive, but listen, you always rush into things half-cocked. Sometimes what looks right at first glance isn’t always right on the second. Does that make sense? You can’t slack on preparation.”

“Please, sir, I know that. When have I ever made a careless mistake?” My numbers were on the rise, and my ego couldn’t have been more inflated.

“I wish you’d understand that there are people around you who care about you, and how lucky you are to have them. Someone’s been beside you, supporting you, and they’re the reason you are where you are. You’re not a child, so I know you’re smart enough to realize that.”

“Someone’s supporting me? My work, you mean? But you said so yourself, sir; results are everything in business.”

“Yes. Yes, I did.” He paused. “I just want you to remember something if you’re planning on staying here. ‘Business’ isn’t all there is to this work. Open your eyes to your surroundings, okay?”

I resented him. Who was he to worry about *my* job when here he was quitting his? I was so naive.

“Chances are I’ll have a promotion waiting for me next quarter with the numbers I’m packing. You don’t need to worry about me.” I was arrogant. *You’re the one transferring. Worry about yourself*, I thought.

“Maybe one day you’ll see the truth. When you do, don’t waste time feeling sorry for yourself. Be the best person you can be. Give that a try and I think you’ll find the world a gentler, less lonely place to live.”

None of my colleague's words made sense to me. I tilted my head as he left the room, and just as the door clicked shut, my eyes opened. There was no unfamiliar ceiling, no stranger in my bed. Just my plain old room on a plain old morning.

"That dream can't be a good omen," I mumbled. "Or maybe it was an epiphany. Yeah, be kind to others, be firm with myself, and be thorough. That's gotta be it."

It had been a long time since I'd last dreamed of my past life. Grand's story, combined with pure exhaustion, must have triggered it. I'd been such a lousy underling all those years ago, but now there was no one to witness what kind of man my struggles had molded me into. I now understood what my superior had been trying to tell me—that I'd lived a lucky life, and that the life I was currently living was just as fortunate. From Brod to Lumina and her Valkyries to everyone back in Merratoni, I was truly blessed and needed to put in some effort if I wanted to be that sort of positive force for others.

I firmly patted my cheeks to rouse myself, then started on my morning stretch and magic exercise routines as I thought back on the previous night. Before meeting up with Jord and my concerned team, I'd played the responsible sober role while the other three engaged in drunken revelry, the responsibilities of which had included but not been limited to letting them talk my ear off about the exact same thing a million times. Although they'd probably all forgotten about having revealed their darkest secrets, just thinking back on it gave me a headache. At least I'd acquired some interesting info.

I still couldn't believe that Catherine was level 312 yet not even *she* had been able to clear the labyrinth. Thank the lord for Substance X, and for my early realization that she belonged on my list of people not to mess with. Yet despite that, my master was apparently even higher-level than Catherine, according to Catherine herself. She seemed oddly assured of that fact.

As far as SP was concerned, the numerical stat itself seemed to be common knowledge, but only those reincarnated like me had the freedom to spend it on the entire skill pool. For example, normal people couldn't use SP to earn affinities with magic, so taking an extra affinity with those points would have been a surefire way of outing myself.

Another super interesting fact that I had unfortunately picked up on was that the Earth Dragon slumbered within a mine near Rockford. Catherine, in her drunken state, had spit out some folklore about the dragons, causing Grand and Trett to go nuts and me to spill a little too much inside info. When, forced to elaborate further, I'd taken out a map, the two craftsmen had pointed to a certain location. My heart pounding, I'd instantly known, without a shadow of a doubt, that it was where the Eternal Dragon slept. I'd heard its pained plea for help in my head but couldn't answer it. I could only assure it that I was doing everything I could.

I'd managed to gloss over my strange behavior but hadn't been able to lift my spirits back up after that. My head was whirling with anxiety at the thought of delving into yet another labyrinth.

Unable to ignore my sudden depression, Trett had offered to make me any handy magic item I had in mind once he completed his current projects. I'd been wanting a mirror for some time, and he readily agreed. But this would be no mere mirror. It would be a transformation dresser, a kind of simplified magic bag that allowed one to remove and equip clothing instantly just by putting a hand to the vanity mirror. You could even save entire outfits in it, including armor (although only ten at a time).

How could I stay depressed after that? The only two things I had to be aware of were that all of my saved clothing would come out if the mirror broke, and that it couldn't store weapons. Catherine called me a girl for wanting a mirror, but I didn't need her biases. Armor was heavy, hard, and a pain to sleep in. I just wanted to be able to strip it all off in the blink of an eye, okay?

Drunk Trett had really gone out of his way for me. As wild as that night had been, I decided that meeting the two weirdos had been a good thing.

I put those thoughts aside (especially the bit about the dragons) and remembered I had to drop off a letter for Master at the Adventurer's Guild. I wasn't training with the Valkyries this morning, so I considered dragging my guard and the Healer Pentad along with me.

Speaking of the pentad, what a creative name, Jord.

I guess I, the sixth healer, wasn't part of that equation, but I stashed away the

twinge of isolation for now. All I needed from them was the wherewithal to stomach Substance X. As long as they could manage that, they'd grow as a unit and learn to get along with the adventurers. And hey, I wasn't the bad guy here. Jord was the one who'd started it by insisting on naming his little troop of healers and leaving me out.

As I finished my stretches, I figured I should head down to the labyrinth to level up a bit more, since going to the Adventurer's Guild meant drinking Substance X. I left a note for my team, then headed out.

Nothing about the labyrinth had changed since my last visit, so the report I'd been planning to give Her Holiness remained the same. Monsters were still difficult to find, and I couldn't shake the strange feeling I'd had since yesterday. Normally I'd clear my head by sparring with Lumina, but a certain pair of old men had made that difficult.

"Time for some training!"

I zipped through the labyrinth, straight through the tenth floor and down to the twentieth. A few fights with the death knights finally helped me get my thoughts back in order. And then it hit me: I was turning into my masters and becoming a battle-crazed lunatic.

I left the labyrinth in low spirits and found Jord waiting for me outside.

"Good morning, sir. Always the early bird."

"Good morning. Just wanted to get the blood flowing a bit. By the way, I appreciate you coming to meet me every day."

"Glad to be of service. I hope it won't always be in front of a labyrinth, though," he said with a scrunched nose.

I realized that I might have forgotten to clean myself on the way out, so I quickly cast Purification. "There, sorry about that. Have you had breakfast yet?"

"I was just about to."

"Mind if I join you?"

"Not at all. Any plans for today?"

The guy was practically my secretary at this point. *I should show my appreciation for real some time.*

“Nothing in particular. Why?”

“Are you taking suggestions?”

“Suggestions, maybe, but we’ll see if I agree to them later.”

We strolled towards the dining hall.

“I hear you’ve been wanting to read the story of Lord Reinstar. Is that true?” Jord asked with a strangely smug look as we entered the hall.

“Yeah, something a little more grounded in facts. None of the dramatizations I keep hearing.” It was flat out inexcusable for the Church of Saint Shurule’s sole S-rank healer to not know the first thing about its founder.

“Hmm, I don’t think I’ve heard anything all that exaggerated, personally.”

I froze up. “Oh, come on,” I laughed nervously. “He created the entire floating city of Neldahl, took out the Demon Lord completely by accident, *and* drove away the Wicked One with the combined power of the dragons and spirits? No way; that’s the stuff of myths.”

If all of that was actually true, it would make Lord Reinstar a god, or an envoy of one...or something. I toyed with the idea that he might have been reincarnated like me, but to reach such levels of unparalleled strength would have taken unreal amounts of effort, luck, and lord knows what else.

“I mean, I definitely see what you’re saying. Why not ask the pope? Reinstar was our founder, so I bet she knows all sorts of stuff no one else does.”

“Good idea. I need to give her a report anyway, so I might do that.”

“And don’t forget to fill me in on anything you’re allowed to, sir.”

I suppose it made sense that even Jord was hungry for more. Lord Reinstar didn’t seem like the kind of person you’d get the nitty-gritty on without knowing the pope.

“Of course. Oh, and I don’t think I’ll be long, so can you gather the team when

we're done eating?"

"Not a problem. Are we..."

"Yes, we're going out."

"I knew you'd come around!"

We continued chatting throughout breakfast.

I parted ways with Jord and went to the pope's chambers to deliver my update.

"Hm, I believe we may presume that the labyrinth's presence is waning," Her Holiness said.

"I think we can, but I'll still be checking it out regularly, just to be safe."

"That would put my mind at ease. Should you need anything that might aid you, do not hesitate to make it known." She sounded cheery today. The perfect time to ask for a favor.

"Thank you, Your Holiness. I apologize for the suddenness of this request, but there is one thing I would like. Does the Church maintain any historical documents on Lord Reinstar?"

"It does. What interest do you have in him?"

"I'm an S-rank healer with no knowledge of Saint Shurule's founder, and my ignorance would only embarrass both myself and the Church. I want to learn what I can while I still have time."

She hesitated for a moment. "I cherish the biography of Lord Reinstar greatly. You must swear to me that it shall be returned, else I will strip you of your classes. Do you still wish to borrow it?"

After all that? I wasn't so sure anymore. But I did have my magic bag, and returning a book wasn't asking for all that much.

"I swear."

"Very well. See that it returns to me quickly. Understand?"

"Yes, Your Holiness."

I had succeeded in obtaining a copy of *The Legend of Reinstar Gustard* but would ultimately end up depressing myself.

The man simply hadn't been human.

07 — The Stupidly OP Protagonist

I met up with Jord and the team after my audience with the pope, and we set off for the Adventurer's Guild.

"Luciel, I wouldn't have come with you if I'd known where you were taking us," Jord complained when we arrived.

"That's why I didn't tell you," I laughed. "Get used to it. We're going to be doing this regularly."

Jord looked about ready to cry while the others just looked plain confused as we went inside. The sixteen of us stood out, to say the least, and the lack of sharp glares, abuse, and insults bewildered the majority of the group as their eyes darted all around the guildhall.

I smiled and made for the dining hall, where Grantz shouted, "Saint Weirdo! What're ya doin' dragging all these folks here? Have you lost your mind?"

"There's no need to be rude. This is my team, and I guess I'm sort of their leader now. Don't worry, we're not here to cause trouble. They know the score."

"Gods help you, boy. So, what's on the menu for 'em? Substance X?" The guildmaster grinned. He never got enough of this. I wondered if he'd be open to a drinking contest one of these days. Now, that'd be an easy win for me.

There were more adventurers around than last time, which worked out well.

"Yep, and today's gonna be another Saint Weirdo's Day too. I'd also like to have my team train with some adventurers, if that's okay."

"You serious?" he scoffed. "Knights. Against adventurers."

"What's weird about that? I meant what I said. It's a win-win for everyone, and I'll heal everyone back up afterwards."

"The Church'll be okay with that?" The guildmaster's job was to worry about these things, after all.

Being an S-ranker had its privileges, though. "It'll probably be okay. I work

directly for the pope herself.”

“You better not be stickin’ your nose where it doesn’t belong, or the Whirlwind won’t let me hear the end of it.”

“I appreciate the concern, but I’m sitting pretty for now.”

“I’ll bet. Sheesh, those Church folks are gettin’ crazy with who they’ll hire these days. Anyway, about that win-win somethin’ or other you mentioned... Got time now? I wanna hear the details.”

“Plenty. Mind getting these guys their Substance while we’re at it?”

I felt every single one of the men behind me pierce me with their glares.

“Ya sure they’re not gonna stab you in the back one o’ these days?”

“Oh, they’ll be fine. I’ve got plenty to entice them with. You could always show them some special treatment if you feel bad for them.”

“I don’t envy you fellas,” Grantz muttered under his breath.

I saw everyone nod in silence, then the guildmaster left to get their drinks. Once they all had their mugs, they quickly became the center of attention in the hall, then promptly passed out.

Meanwhile, I left my letter to Master with Grantz, and we ironed out the details of those joint training sessions I’d mentioned.

Jord and the others were not happy when they woke up, so I treated them to lunch and promised we’d have that outing with the Valkyries before too long, and they perked right back up. This method wasn’t going to fly every single time, though, so I’d need a new carrot to dangle before long.

After we returned to HQ, I borrowed Forêt from the stable master for some training.

“Nice to see you again, pal.”

I hopped on and we kicked into a gallop. My Riding skill was slowly increasing, but I didn’t know if finally getting it to level one would allow me to ride other horses.

Forêt suddenly brayed and came to a stop.

“Sorry, lost focus there.”

She was a smart steed and always seemed attuned to my feelings. I cast cleansing magic on her while I considered how I might get Her Holiness and Yanbath to hand her over for my travels. Forêt absolutely loved cleansing magic—so did all the other horses, for that matter, but they still wouldn’t let me near them. It was a bit of a sore point. I didn’t like to talk about it.

“Please just let me ride you guys some time,” I begged after bringing Forêt back to the stables.

Later, I retired to my room, then flipped open *The Legend of Reinstar Gustard*.

Lord Reinstar was born some three hundred years ago as the second son of the mayor of a frontier village. He was a precocious child and began helping to tend the flocks as well as the injured at the young age of five. At seven he became an apprentice huntsman, and not long after, his village was set upon by monsters. Lord Reinstar fought tooth and nail against the invaders, and this was when he shot his first arrows through the miasmic beasts.

Three years later, his life would change forever when orcs invaded his home. There were no adventurers in the village at the time, and all seemed lost until Lord Reinstar slew nearly every last one of them single-handedly with magically charged arrows. When word of his feats reached the ears of Earl Gustard, he summoned Reinstar at once to be the attendant of his academy-bound daughter of the same age, Lizalia. It is said that Reinstar’s companion on his way to the Gustard estate was a pegasus, a creature he rescued in an act that earned him the friendship of the spirits.

And so Reinstar the commoner was enrolled in a wealthy institute for nobles, where he excelled in all subjects and quickly reached the top of his class. A particularly infamous escapade of his occurred during an address he was meant to give, but which ultimately fell to another student from an exceptionally powerful family. Books and learning were simply wasted on Reinstar, who had no need for them. He would often skip lessons in favor of his true passion—adventuring—as well as inventing spells. He was considered a prodigy of the

arcane arts.

Upon graduating, trouble came to the Gustard estate and Lizalia became the earl's sole remaining child. She and Reinstar would marry a year later, adopting Reinstar into the ranks of the nobility. After years of studying political and stately affairs, he was recognized as the new regional earl and would go on to dedicate himself to the people.

I continued to read.

After the war, there was an abundance of orphaned children throughout the world. So Lord Reinstar made right the barren land and conjured a vast orphanage with his magic, a haven for the lost souls. Thus began the Republic of Saint Shurule.

Several years passed, and Lord Reinstar traveled the lands, healing the sick and feeding the hungry. But then the monsters rose up in violence, so he slew them by the horde, earning him the adventurer rank of SSS. The corpses of his quarries were cleansed with magic and became food for towns and villages.

The war being followed by yet more violence exhausted Lord Reinstar, and he sought to leave a legacy that might heal rather than fight and destroy. He wished for nothing but for all suffering to end, so he created guilds for healers to complement those that already existed for adventurers throughout the world.

I couldn't believe the man described in these pages had really existed. It was absurd. All of his feats, including the establishment of the Healer's Guild, had come from his own finances that he himself had built up by improving the wealth of the earldom he'd married into. And then that SSS-rank adventurer bit? It was like he'd peaked in high school, then just kept going. He was a protagonist. A *real* protagonist.

Was this what it meant to be an S-rank healer? To bring hope to the people? I wasn't ready for that, but I had to do what had to be done, and, thankfully, I wasn't nearly as superhuman as Lord Reinstar. I still wanted to grow my network of friends and allies and live my days as a healer peacefully, free from

those expectations. I hadn't finished reading the entire book, but it was clear to me that, if the information in it was accurate, Lord Reinstar had either acquired multiple classes or was outright legendary.

Frankly, comparing the two of us, Reinstar had me beat in pretty much every way—except for one: my mental fortitude. I might have been weak, but if I could keep my chin up through thick and thin, that would put us on equal footing. I truly believed it. Because I knew there were people like Brod who cared about me. People who supported me. And that was another thing that I felt confident could stand up to Reinstar. I wasn't so sure about the other guy, but I knew how to network.

I was an S-rank healer. I just had to do whatever an S-rank healer could manage and let other people play their parts. Nothing good would come of setting impossible standards or comparing myself to a legend. I wasn't in this alone. All around me were kind, caring people, and they were the ones who had made me into who I was. To rely on them was not a weakness; it was a strength. Likewise, bettering myself in order to allow others to rely on me only made the bond stronger. I didn't need to be the strongest in order to be the best.

The story of Reinstar didn't get me down. I wouldn't let it. With renewed resolve and hope in my heart, I set my sights on tomorrow.

On my way to join the Valkyries' training the next morning, someone called from behind me, "Good morning, Luciel."

"Good morning, Lumina," I replied. "Looking forward to today's session."

"Likewise. Tell me, do you and your unit have plans this afternoon?"

"No, nothing in particular. I tend to let them have their own time when we aren't going out. Why do you ask?"

"What would you say to joining our drills?"

"In the forest, you mean? Well, that depends on how Forêt Noire's feeling, since she's kind of the only one I can ride."

She chuckled. "Still having horse troubles, I see."

“You don’t know the half of it. They like my cleansing magic, but our relationships are a little strained.”

“Perhaps your mare’s prone to jealousy.”

“I wish it were that simple. It’s honestly a mystery, so there’s nothing I can do to fix it. Even Yanbath’s given up on me.”

“I suppose if worst comes to worst, you could come by carriage.”

“You really need me there? What’re you guys after?”

“Just hoping to lend a hand. My girls tell me our joint exercises left your team with quite an impression of you, and I wanted to help improve your image further, if you’ll allow me.”

Holy crap. What had I done to deserve such overwhelming kindness? How would I ever be able to repay it? I was over the freaking moon.

“Absolutely, yes. Thank you so much.”

Lumina chuckled again. “For today’s drill, we’ll be subduing great boars in the forests nearby. It would serve you well to know the difference between labyrinthian opponents and living ones.”

She was way too kind, really. But those drills meant the Valkyries were going to go all-out. Hopefully my team could make it back with their dignity unscathed.

“We’ll be there. Just let me clarify something... Is it true that monsters feel emotion?”

“Indeed. Some even beg for their lives.”

The undead never did. I was *not* ready for any humanoid or cute and/or fluffy monsters pleading for mercy. No question, I’d one hundred percent hesitate to strike.

“I think I prefer the labyrinth monsters.”

“Agreed.”

Was it just me or was Lumina always this cool?

“Oh, another question I never got the chance to ask. What are your guys’

levels? I just hit eleven the other day.”

“Be proud, Luciel. You endured training with people over level one hundred and thirty. No small feat for someone at level one.”

“Whew, that’s a gap all right. I don’t like using stats as an excuse, though, so I’d like to be able to beat you all before I catch up.”

“I welcome that challenge,” she grinned.

To be clear, I wasn’t aiming for a landslide victory. Not against the strongest members of the knights. That was just unrealistic.

“We’ll meet after lunch, then?” I confirmed.

“Let’s. I expect it to run from afternoon to evening.”

“Got it. And sorry to change the subject again, but do you think we’d stand a chance against you all if you used Physical Enhancement for today’s training?”

“Certainly not without your barrier and healing magic.” She thought for a moment. “Otherwise, I suppose it could be an interesting match. There is one concern I have, though.”

“What’s that?”

“Accidents occur when practicing with blades, and although I know your magic can heal physical injuries, I worry about the mental damage that it can’t fix.”

Oh. Right. I was so used to cuts and bruises from my master that I’d forgotten normal people typically didn’t like experiencing severe lacerations.

“I’ll have them sit out if there seem to be any problems, but I think the more we do it, the more everyone will toughen up.”

“That’s a dangerous expectation.”

She had a point. Using magic to desensitize oneself to injury wasn’t exactly a good thing. “Still, I want them to get strong enough to be able to stand up to your Valkyries.”

“I would welcome that. If it’s possible, that is.”

We quickly arrived at the training grounds, finished our warmup laps, then

sparred like last time, eleven versus eleven. The results were a resounding defeat for my team. This time, however, the girls went all-out from the start, and some of my people still managed to hold them back or even counterattack. It helped to give everyone a better grasp of their abilities and a goal to strive for.

When our session and subsequent review ended, I told everyone about the drills we'd be attending that afternoon.

"You're the greatest, Captain! I'll follow you to the end of the world!"

"I'm so glad I joined up!"

"Tell me what we need, Captain, and I'll get everything ready."

The Valkyries watching us burst out laughing. I looked over my group of what were essentially rowdy tweens on a grade school field trip and felt disappointed by the gracelessness of my gender.

With that, our training concluded, and I dismissed everyone with the order to be ready with their horses by the afternoon.

08 — Impromptu Barbeque

Twenty-seven horses were gathered outside the Holy City, ready for the upcoming drills. To my surprise, Jord and the other healers could ride their steeds perfectly well. It soon became clear to me that I was the lowest-level rider out of everyone present, and my mood took a dive.

I sat atop Forêt Noire, who was acting strangely pompous and bossy around the other horses. I almost started to believe it *was* Forêt that was keeping me from riding any of the others.

We took our position next to Lumina, the one who actually knew where we were going, and started on our way. Forêt galloped, nimble and free, and “horse-riding” began to take on new meaning to me. I’d never let her run so unhindered before. If nothing else, this revelation made the entire outing worth it.

“You’re tensing up, Luciel,” Lumina warned. “You’ll tire both yourself and the poor steed out.”

“I think I’ll be okay,” I laughed. “I’ll just keep casting Heal until I figure this out.”

“You can’t be serious.”

Forêt’s intense speed jostled me all over the place, and without stirrups to steady myself, it felt like I was going to fall off at any moment. It was all I could do to focus on keeping my thighs tight so that I wouldn’t eat dirt. I couldn’t even talk to anyone. The Valkyries and my team were perplexed at first but quickly found my floundering entertaining and started to laugh.

Just as I was getting the hang of it, we arrived.

“That forest is our destination. Dismount and prepare,” Lumina called.

I hopped off Forêt to feel a stinging in my groin. Go figure...using muscles for an extended period of time made them hurt.

I cast cleansing magic on my mount. “Thanks, bud. I’ll try and make the return trip a bit easier.”

She whinnied in reply, as if to thank me. Yanbath had cautioned me that a bad rider put more strain on the horse, much like driving motorbikes improperly would wear down the tires and stuff faster. The bikes never complained, though. And none of this would have been such an issue if I'd been able to ride other horses to get my Riding skill higher.

"Uh, Luciel, sir? You ride like a stone statue," Beatrice remarked as she came up next to me.

"Except half as graceful," Kathy added, kicking me while I was down.

They were terrible actors. I could see the smirks and giggling behind their "concerned" expressions.

"Forget the 'sir,'" I insisted. "I know I've got my own unit now, but I'm still a Valkyrie, even if only honorary."

Self-control went right out the window, and the two girls completely lost it, followed by Jord and the others. What else was there for me to do but join in?

Suddenly, seemingly drawn by our laughter, a small car emerged from the forest. Wait, no, never mind; it was a forest boar. The Healer Pentad (and I) recoiled, but the others seemed completely unfazed.

"Sir, that's one big monster. Isn't this, like, dangerous?" Jord whimpered.

I sure thought so, but we looked like children compared to the Valkyries right now.

"Oh boy, he looks tasty," Beatrice commented.

"We'll have to drain the blood. Then we ought to be able to enjoy it somewhat safely," Myla remarked.

"Fortunately, I have my frying pan right here."

"Elizabeth, you always have that damn thing. Hell, I just wanna stuff my face with him already! I'd kill for some booze to wash it down too!"

"You don't even drink, Saran. I'll thank you to not make vulgar remarks."

"Captain Lumina, can we take this thing down already?" another Valkyrie asked.

“Thought that was Luciel and his folks’ job,” Gannet replied.

“Show no mercy,” Myla instructed. “Hesitation leads to cruelty if one can’t deliver the finishing blow. Even for monsters.”

“Go on, Luciel. Show us how much you’ve grown,” Ripnear urged.

“I’ll pick out the bones.”

“Aim for the neck and avoid the head; it’s too thick.”

I had no choice in the matter. Did I even stand a chance against this thing? I seriously doubted it.

“You know, I think I’m good,” I argued. “Me? Take that thing on? I don’t even know how to fight it.”

“Honestly, Luciel, you’re more cowardly than I thought. I found the wraiths of the labyrinth far more intimidating,” Lumina reproached me. “You may have to fight during your travels, and this is your chance to get a taste for it. A forest boar would never best you. We all believe in you.”

Did they really? Jord seemed about ready to hightail it out of there.

Lumina pushed me lightly from behind, and I gave in.

“Guess I’ll break a leg.”

I cast Area Barrier and activated Physical Enhancement, then faced the boar. I felt everyone around me watching, felt their confidence in me, until I got close to the monster, and they started shouting out instructions to prepare for the barbeque.

Leaving me no time to be dejected, the beast charged.

“Crya, Divine Healer, God of Fate, Lord, Buddha, ancestors, lend me your strength.”

I waited for just the right moment to sidestep the charge. Taking it head-on was out of the question. A healer couldn’t afford to be that reckless. But then I sensed the beast’s defenselessness and summoned a dagger from my bag, filled it with magic, and flung it. It landed squarely in the monster’s right eye, slowing its speed dramatically.

Now we were talking. As I wavered between dodging or parrying, then going for the neck, I threw another dagger, which buried itself in the monster's left eye. The boar toppled over and rolled onto the ground before coming to a stop with its stomach directly in front of me, spasming.

"Wow, uh...sorry about that."

I quickly put the beast out of its misery by severing its head. When I turned around, I was met with applause. That is, until Beatrice and Kathy came over to rain on my parade.

"You were doing so well—why'd you cut the head off? Now there's blood everywhere!"

"We need to gut it quickly."

Saran and Elizabeth promptly started skinning it.

"Damn, these guts'd go great with some booze!"

"Saran, again, you don't drink! For heaven's sake... And monsters are inedible. They must be purified to remove the miasma first."

"Purified?" the other three girls echoed.

"We need a favor, Luciel," Kathy requested while every single Valkyrie shot me death stares.

I looked at Lumina, but she, too, had been bewitched. And it was then that I knew I had no say in the matter. I stood amid the chaos alone, my very own unit losing themselves to the girls' strange behavior, and made my heart a stone. I resigned myself to my fate as the designated purifier.

The Healer Pentad was amazed by the extent of my magic, but I was too focused on the ravenous women around me to care. The Valkyries swiftly carried away the purified meat and our barbeque quickly kicked off.

Today's savior: Palaragus. He was the one who'd asked about medicinals a while back. Apparently, he grew herbs and spices in his room at HQ, and that was why he'd been worried about my opinion on the matter. Now that his mind was at ease, he carried culinary spices everywhere he went. And man did it come in handy this time. The Valkyries' traditional meal of unseasoned monster

meat was transformed into a flavorful feast. That paladin and his plants would go far.



I had to wonder, though, whether this sort of training did us any good. If this became the norm, it would really raise the bar for boosting morale.

All these worries quickly vanished from my head, though. The Valkyries were adamant about our units cooperating like this again, and I knew the others would eat me alive if I refused. So we decided to do these exercises once or twice a month from then on.

Plus, I just couldn't say no to Lumina when she looked at me that way. But all play and no work wouldn't get Jack very far, now would it? There was only one thing to do: make their training at the Adventurer's Guild that much harder.

And so time flew by.

09 — New Gear, Old Favorites

Three months passed. Three uneventful months of nothing but the labyrinth, training with the boys at the Adventurer's Guild, and purifying at "barbeques" (disguised as special drills).

The practice of said barbeques had spread throughout the other regiments on account of the Valkyries letting my meat-sanitizing abilities slip to Catherine. On the bright side, it helped to replace the fear I'd felt for non-labyrinthian monsters with a sort of respect. Even better, knights weren't apt to stick nicknames on me like the adventurers were. I was sure the adventurers would have loved to christen us something like "the Munch Bunch" had they known about the new tradition.

In any case, my relationship with the knights was starting to take a turn for the better, my team was coming together, and more of them were managing to stomach their Substance X without seeing stars.

And then the day came when Mardan and Muneller finally completed my healing guidelines. The rules were ready at last.

Her Holiness called me to her chambers to discuss the matter. "We shall officially announce them once you have turned twenty. What say you to that?"

"They're in your hands. I've already confirmed that everything's in order with the archbishops, so I'll leave it up to you."

I wished we could have made them official immediately, but I was nothing to the healers, their families, or the bribed guild staff, who would all object.

"Very well. As I recall, I once requested that you study the administrative side of our guilds and clinics. I would again urge you to do so."

"Administrative?" It almost sounded like she wanted me to start thinking about the possibility of running a clinic myself.

"Indeed. Your rules for the healing practice are certain to incite rebellion among those who once subsisted on injustice. And you are an S-rank healer. For you to vanquish evil and aid the righteous is my only hope. Knowledge will

serve you well in that pursuit.”

“Wouldn’t my interference infringe on their authority?”

“Remember, Luciel, you answer only to me. I will hear your reports and deliver my judgment personally.”

“Understood. I won’t shame the S-rank name.”

“Well said. I will have orders for you shortly. Be ready to act on them.”

“Yes, Your Holiness.”

I ran into Catherine just outside the chamber as I left. I hadn’t seen her much beyond the exercises the knights held.

“Hey there, Catherine. Here to see Her Holiness?”

“Nope, just you,” she said with a smile that nearly made me flinch. These days, upturned lips on Catherine usually meant the knights were about to be in for it. This time, however, her smile was warm. More like the Cattleya I remembered.

“Do you need something?”

“Remember Grand and Trett?”

“Of course. Does that mean what I think it means?”

She beamed even more brightly. “Yep. I just received notice that your gear’s all done. If you have time, shall we stop by the blacksmith’s?”

“Absolutely!”

I’d stashed that memory in a corner of my brain for the last three months, where it had been gathering dust until now. Gear made from the scales and fangs of the Holy Dragon. Just for me. I could barely contain my excitement.

“I have some business with those two myself.”

“Oh?”

“And don’t worry about grabbing your team. I’ll be your escort today.”

Chills ran down my spine. I was one wrong move away from another night as the designated nondrinker.

“Sure, but can I give the guys an update first?”

“Of course.”

I stopped by my room and passed my plans on to Piazza, who’d been standing by for me outside. Then Catherine and I left for the blacksmith.

“Notice anything different about the Church lately?” Catherine asked.

“Yeah, actually. It seems like the knights’ training has gotten tougher, and they don’t hate me as much anymore.”

“I think that’s because your team takes the brunt of it now,” she smirked.

“Pretty much.”

These past several days had really been some of the most peaceful I’d known since coming to HQ. The lack of glares worked wonders for the soul.

“Okay, but I meant ‘different’ as in strange. Like anything that just feels off.”

“Nothing in particular. Not that I’d really notice, though. Who knows, maybe I’m being poisoned and just can’t tell because I’m resistant.” Catherine gaped at me. “Please don’t look at me like that.”

“I don’t think I’ll ever understand you. Just please try to be considerate of your team.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” Not that they had much to worry about, since the healers could use curing magic just fine and Palaragus always had herbs on hand.

We eventually reached the smithy. An employee spotted us and ran into the back, then Grand and Trett came out soon after.

“Took your time, didn’t you?” Grand grunted. “That Cattleya with you? Always a pleasure.”

“Ohhh, it’s been so long I was scared you’d forgotten all about us,” Trett whimpered.

“Sorry, I’ve been so caught up with managing my team,” I said. “It’s my first time leading others, so learning the ropes has been a little rough.”

“Honest words.”

“Truthful too.”

“I would just love to stand around and mingle,” the artificer interjected, “but why don’t we all scoot inside?”

“Right you are,” the dwarf replied.

The men had all but taken over the shop for their own purposes. The actual owner followed behind them and went about the place helping with odds and ends, completely willingly, watching and absorbing all he could from the two masters. I admired his open-mindedness, and it drove home yet again just how extraordinary these craftsmen were.

We were escorted through the shop and into a room, where I froze at the door. Their creations, my new equipment, blew my expectations out of the water. I could scarcely wrap my feeble mind around the sight. Vain attempts to express my feelings in words ran through my head as I rubbed my eyes before taking a second glance.

I had entrusted my valuable materials to Grand and Trett because the pope and Catherine trusted them. Because I’d known they’d sit in my magic bag for an eternity otherwise. Because I sensed that the two men had great pride in their work. And now that the job was done, my emotions were...indescribable.

They waved for me to come closer.

“Well? Marvelous, isn’t it?” Trett said, glowing. “It protects against miasma, nullifies magic, makes you harder to sense, and even regulates temperature! You won’t have any trouble against blades or spells with this, oh no.”

“Speechless, eh?” Grand chuckled. “This here hardens when infused with magical energy. Works like a booster for spells too. Funnel magic through it, and it’ll give you a bit o’ oomph, no extra cost.”

Satisfied grins of a job well done spread across their faces while I, on the other hand, was still stunned, frozen, jaw on the floor. Three months ago, I’d been fondled, made to swing swords around, sized up, interrogated about my fighting style, put through all manner of tests and trials. That could not be changed. No matter how many times I blinked, the fruits of my suffering never

changed.

I took a few deep breaths, then turned to Grand. “I mean no disrespect, but didn’t I ask for a sword?”

“Ain’t it a beaut?”

The “beaut” was an ornate staff. Maybe I wasn’t as resistant to poison as I thought, because I *had* to be drugged and hallucinating right now.

I looked at Trett. “And what was the point of all that touching you did when you didn’t even make me armor? Those are just plain old clothes.”

I was so utterly baffled that I had half a mind to try and fix whatever was wrong with these two with an Extra Heal or Purification spell. They looked at each other, then burst out laughing.

“Fooled you, didn’t it?” Grand took the staff. “This is no walkin’ cane. Some old swordsman came up with this trick to carry weapons where you normally can’t take ’em. Just a bit of a flick here and...”

The staff suddenly transformed into a blade.

“What the—?!”

It happened so quickly and naturally that I doubted whether it had ever been a staff at all. I’d seen hidden blades, trick swords, stuff like that in books in my past life, but those had used a mechanism of some kind to *hide* the weapon. Not this one. It had literally morphed into a sword, like an illusion breaking.

“How’s that, eh? The dragon here at the handle’s not just for decoration.” The blacksmith marveled at his creation like a whimsical young boy. Living in a world of magic and fantasy didn’t mean we couldn’t be amazed by cool tricks and dragons.

“So, I bet these clothes have something up their sleeves too,” I said to Trett. “What’s the gimmick? Do they change into armor?”

“Oh-ho, now you’re just being silly. I just thought you could use something a little less bulky, healer boy. They *are* a good deal stronger than any armor you have now, for the record.”

“They’re stronger than armor?! *Metal* armor?!”

“I just couldn’t help myself. Oh, I’ve never worked with such interesting material before. In more ways than one,” Trett purred, fidgeting nervously. “I really enjoyed feeling you up.”

Awesome. Didn’t need to hear that. Moving on.

I hadn’t believed he was really from a family of legendary crafters at first, but the work spoke for itself. I took the sword and copied Grand, morphing it into a blade and back again several times while my heart screamed with joy. I’d always had a soft spot for swords that could shapeshift like this. Nothing was cooler than seeing the dragon pattern glow and the cane transform. Nothing. I’d have kept playing with it if Trett hadn’t interrupted me.

“Aww, Luciel, won’t you try on the clothes I made for you?”

“I-I got it! I’ll put them on, just stop trying to sneak up behind me!” I shuddered.

Everyone looked bored after watching me mess around with the sword, so I quickly got to changing. I took off the armor I’d obtained on the fortieth floor of the labyrinth and slipped into the weave of Holy Dragon scales. I instantly felt strangely protected.

“How do I look?” I asked.

“Dashing!” Trett replied. “Oh-ho, your safety is in good hands now!”

I hated that phrasing, so I turned to Catherine, the honest one.

“He’s right. You look dignified,” she said. “Throw on your robe, and you’ll really start to fit the S-rank healer image. You might even stop being mistaken for a knight.”

I responded with a shy smile. I was certainly on the bulkier side of body shapes compared to most healers.

“Why don’t we call your new staff...” Grand rubbed his chin. “The Illusion Staff.”

A little uncreative, I thought.

“Then it’s the Illusion Sword while in blade form?”

“That’s the idea. Keep it in staff form while you’re healin’ and all that, and no one’ll take you for nothin’ but a regular healer.”

“It’s lovely,” Trett said. “Ah, I promised you something else, didn’t I, Luciel?”

The fox-man dug around in his magic satchel and pulled out a long mirror. It took me a moment to realize what it was.

“Is that what I think it is?”

“Yes, sir! This transformation dresser may look like just any old mirror, but it’ll handle all your fashion organization needs! Your new outfit took a tad more time than expected, so I asked a friend to bring it over.”

“And this is mine?”

“All yours. I keep my promises.”

“Wow, I can’t thank you enough!”

“Your happy face is all the thanks I need. Now, if you’ll imbue it with your magic to register yourself...”

“We did some fine work,” Grand remarked. “Nothin’ beats gettin’ paid for doing what you love. Gimme a shout next time you get your hands on any worthwhile materials or you need your gear tweaked. I’ll make sure my lackeys know who you are.”

“Same here,” Trett said. “And I’ll send word when I get something working for that magic item you mentioned. Stop by if you ever visit our little town, won’t you? I’ll *always* be waiting.”

My hair stood on end and chills ran down my back, but my honed business acumen held my smile firm.

Not long after, the two of them departed the Holy City. The other craftsmen were sad to see them go. I promised Grand that I’d have that drink with Brod the next time we met, and Trett mentioned he’d have my magic item delivered to the smithy they’d been using, much to the owner’s delight.

On the way back to Headquarters, something nagged at me.

“Say, Catherine, Grand mentioned getting paid. How much was it?”

The smile on her face clearly meant that it hadn't been cheap.

"Sometimes ignorance is bliss, Luciel. Considering the discounts, and the fact that we supplied the materials, I suppose I'd put it at the price of every single magic stone you brought back from the labyrinth combined."

"Every single one, huh?"

Whatever that meant. I didn't know the individual value of those gems. I would someday, but today was not that day.

I got back to my room, told Jord to dismiss the team, and started playing with my new transformation dresser.

"Holy crap! What's this do? Holy crap! I really need to learn some new words, but holy crap!"

My excited shouts leaked out into the hallway. It couldn't register my underwear, but I was positively amazed by the strange mechanism that allowed the mirror to remember what I was wearing. Could anyone blame me? It was like saving gear sets or outfits in a video game.

It worked simply enough. The dresser's owner needed only to touch their hand to the mirror, which then displayed numbers with the options to save an outfit, delete a preset, or shift into one. Only ten sets could be saved at a time, but that made it no less handy for storing clothes like a magic bag.

Someone start mass-producing this so I can use it as a gift for someone!

With technology like this, cameras couldn't have been that far off. I was sure that Trett would be interested in the idea.

"I'll make these Holy Dragon clothes and my robe the default and just wear my armor over it."

Slowly, my excitement waned as I came to notice a critical issue.

"I only have three sets saved in here."

I'd pretty much worn the same clothes since my first day in the labyrinth. With cleansing magic, hygiene was such a non-issue that it had never even crossed my mind to change, plus my robe kept anything from being torn apart.

Well, there had been that little episode where I'd been routinely dismembered by the fourth boss. I'd had to shop for new clothes after that. Was it sanitary having never changed my underwear? Sure it was. I had Purification. But this was bound to be one slippery slope if left unchecked.

That one worry snowballed, and all of a sudden I was filled with all sorts of concerns. I wasn't even remotely prepared to travel. Nearly all the clothes I'd been given back in Merratoni had been ruined during my training with Brod, so all I had left was the stuff I'd bought while out with Nanaella. There was my Church-issued robe and the armor I'd received, but I hadn't gotten any other *real* clothing until today. The only armor set I even had to save in the dresser was the one I'd gotten on the fortieth floor.

Hold the phone—my hair was *long*. I'd never had much of a beard, so I didn't have to bother with that, but I hadn't cut my hair once since coming to HQ. I'd just been leaving it tied up all this time and hadn't really noticed it since my robe regulated temperature so well. It never made me feel overheated.

Maybe this calls for a ceremonial cutting of the ponytail.

From there my thoughts only continued to spiral out of control. One thing led to another, and suddenly I was thinking about how I hadn't cooked a single thing since reincarnating. Gulgar had handled my meals in Merratoni, and the dining hall ladies took care of me here. Or I went to restaurants. All I did at the barbeques was purify the meat. I felt an urge to hit the stove, but I'd need to get my hands on some cooking tools first.

Besides food and clothing, the third necessity for survival was shelter, and that was no problem. As long as I had my angel's pillow and wasn't in immediate danger, I could get by anywhere. Should something happen to it, though, I'd be out of luck *and* short on sleep. If I could get any rest in the carriage we'd be traveling in, that is.

Speaking of carriages, I had to consider Forêt Noire as well (who I was kind of assuming I'd be taking along at this point). I was going to start traveling the world once I turned twenty. That was just over a year from now. The time would fly in the blink of an eye. I was supposed to be an S-rank healer, and I didn't even know the first thing about clinics.

Please send me to a place I don't actually need to fix, I prayed. Or better yet, what if I just became a wandering healer? On second thought, that was bound to cause problems, much like many of the things I did. I was like a walking landmine.

The more I thought about everything, the harder it was to stop. Just when it was becoming too much to bear, I remembered an old forgotten habit of mine.

"I might be the biggest mess of a human right now, but..." I pulled out some parchment from my bag and began to write out a list of worries and how best to solve them. I used to take notes compulsively, but even the toughest habits can be broken, given a few years.

"I've gotta keep it together. Being reincarnated is no excuse for ignoring what I learned in my last life."

Two little things I'd learned during my first year of work back on Earth were to always have a notebook on hand to jot things down in, and to always be polite. Those meager habits were just that—meager, but crucial to one's personal growth.

This world had no newspapers, no television or news cycles, so I'd gotten swept up in its comparatively slow pace and forgotten. I knew I wasn't the brightest bulb, but how could I not have remembered?

I took a deep breath. I could criticize myself all I wanted, and there was a time and place for that, but it wasn't here or now. Now was the time to move forward.

Information was at the top of the list of necessities for my upcoming travels. I needed to learn how guilds and clinics operated, and get a better understanding of the state of the two institutions, and the best place to hear the latest rumors was the Adventurer's Guild.

"Man, and I just got back. I'll need an escort."

I opened my door to leave and saw Jord conveniently approaching.

"Hey, Jord, I was just about to stop by the Adventurer's Guild and maybe do some shopping after. Want to tag along?"

“I’m all for shopping, but didn’t you just go out with Catherine?” he asked.

“I thought of something I need last minute, that’s all.”

“You? Going out for something other than food? Weird.” He laughed as we set out.

At the guildhall, we were met with a flood of wounded adventurers.

“What do we do about this, sir?” Jord asked.

“We make today Saint Weirdo’s Day and heal them. Let’s see what’s going on with Grantz first.”

“I don’t know if we have the time. Some of those injuries look deep.”

“You’re right. Could you go find him for me?”

“On it.”

I watched him dash to the dining hall and prepared to heal everyone I could. The Blessing of the Divine Healer made my magic something else. My Heal spells didn’t just stop the bleeding and restore HP anymore; now they could also repair cartilage and bone. In fact, the guild had built up an odd surplus of walking canes, left behind by elderly patients who’d made it out better than they’d come in. And this time I had the Illusion Staff to make my spells even stronger. By how much, I couldn’t possibly begin to guess.

I urged everyone to take the injured downstairs as I made my way there myself.

“Okay, I’m going to begin healing, everyone. As always, I can’t restore lost blood, so please be cautious and treat your lives carefully.” Of course, Extra Heal could regenerate blood without issue, but my ability to use that spell was still a well-kept secret.

I cast Area High Heal over the crowd until everyone was healthy again, but without the boost from my staff. That experiment would have to wait. Then I went to the dining hall and let Grantz know that everyone was safe.

“So, whaddaya need this time, Saint Weirdo, sir? Just name it,” the guildmaster said.

“‘Saint Weirdo’ is bad enough, guildmaster. You don’t need to add the ‘sir.’ Really.”

Grantz had really taken to that habit lately. My complaints were likely in vain, though. The nickname was going nowhere without another one to take its place.

“Why don’t you stop callin’ me ‘guildmaster,’ ya grouch? Anyway, what’d you need, eh?”

“I wanted to ask where adventurers get their hair cut. I know you’ve got that beard and all, but where does everyone else get trimmed?”

The pity in his gaze was palpable. “Can’t blame ya for not knowin’ things, I guess. ‘Specially not a fella with a life as harsh as yours. Well, you’ll find magic razors at magic shops. Some folks use plain knives, but I’d avoid ‘em if ya don’t know what you’re doin’.”

“Yeah, I don’t really trust myself, but I guess I could just use Heal if I got cut.”

“True enough. You can get scissors for your hair at any old smithy or general store. Ya never heard of a salon before?”

Wow, I was pretty ignorant, huh? Good to know there were barbers here. But letting someone put sharp objects that close to my face was a little scary, so I put a pin in that option.

“Need ta know anything else?” Grantz continued. “I’ll teach ya everything you wanna know.”

“Yeah, I’ve got another question. Why is Jord passed out?”

“Gave ‘im the undiluted stuff you drink. It happens.”

“Let me guess, my tongue’s ‘defective’ because it doesn’t happen to me?”

“Er, any other questions? Hit me.”

“Well...”

I had Grantz tell me where to pick up seasonings, vegetables, and meats for cooking. Seeing my diligent note-taking, he offered me his own notebook filled with well-practiced recipes and processes to copy. And that would’ve been

more than enough, but then he offered to teach me more if I ever felt like learning, wrote me a letter of introduction to his favorite metalworker to buy knives and such from, and then ultimately decided to host a cooking class.

Milty eventually showed up and asked to join in, which Grantz timidly accepted. Over time, rumors of the gruff guildmaster and his wholesome lessons would slowly spread until he came to be known as The Iron Chef with the Silk Heart.

Meanwhile, Jord remained unconscious.

“Oh, Milty, I’m looking for clothing stores where I can find stuff that says, ‘I’m modest, but I know how to dress well.’ You know, so I don’t look haggard in front of foreign nobles or something.”

“I think I know what you mean?” the vice guildmaster replied. “I recommend you go with a girl, though. I know Jord’s your valet, but people will start thinking you swing that way if you take him shopping for clothes.”

“Why would they think that? We’re just friends.”

“You’re his superior, aren’t you?”

“Yeah?”

“Then you’re not friends.”

“You...have a point. I’ll ask some girls I know.”

“A wise decision.”

Jord continued to be comatose while I considered my options for who to invite. How I wished Nanaella or Monica were here. Catherine, Lumina, and the Valkyries came to mind, but they didn’t strike me as the types to bother themselves with fashion. At any rate, Grantz’s cooking lessons had crossed one worry off my list.

For poor Jord’s sake, I brought us back to HQ and went to the stables for a bit of animal therapy to soothe my thoughts. And then the incredible happened. A four-year-old stallion named Malto, with a penchant for biting my head, finally let me ride him. For a few seconds. But hey, progress.

“They’re getting used to you,” was all Yanbath had to say.

I made it a goal of mine to earn the privilege of riding every last horse in the stable before I had to leave the city. Still, I couldn't see myself setting out with anyone but Forêt, so I had to remember to bring that up with Her Holiness.

Forêt seemed happy with the plan.

10 — A Date with Destiny

Early the next morning, I went shopping. It was just me and a girl named Rosa, who I'd known for almost two years now.

"This is it."

"This is your favorite place, huh?"

From the outside, the store's options looked fairly normal. It had been so long since I'd last gone shopping for clothes that I already felt myself getting excited.

"Come on, let's go," she said with a nudge, pulling me into the shop.

The interior was bright, spacious, and very clean.

"Welcome! Oh, is that you, Rosa?" an employee called.

"Anna, it's been ages!"

"You're a waitress these days, right?"

"Yeah, I'm here with this man to help pick out some clothes for him."

"Oh, is that your little boy toy?"

"Anna, please, this is Mister Luciel! Maybe you've heard of a certain Saint Weirdo?"

Careful, Luciel. You're standing at the gates of hell right now. One wrong move and you'll never come back alive.

"Saint Weirdo?!" Anna gasped. "Well, gosh, he's so young! Wait, are you shopping with us today, sir?"

"I'm hoping to order a few outfits," I said. "Oh, and it's a pleasure to meet you. You can call me Luciel."

"That's very generous of you."

I didn't have anything else to spend my money on anyway. If I didn't spend it somewhere, it'd just sit around in my account, and that wasn't very good for the economy. Not that I intended to get all frivolous or anything.

“Saint Weirdo is a wealthy man,” Rosa remarked proudly.

“You know how to snag ’em, Rosa. I’ll go call my daughter. Why don’t you pick something out for yourself?”

“Oh, I’m fine.”

“Please, Rosa, I insist. You’ve cooked for me for a long time now, so let me return the favor,” I said.

“You’re sure, dear?”

I never knew eyes could literally sparkle in anticipation. There was no getting out of it now, even if I wanted to. I mean, if this would help make up for all the help Rosa had been, I was all for it.

“Positive. I don’t like to leave debts unpaid.”

“Maybe I’ll look around a little, then.”

“Appreciate the business,” Anna giggled.

I’d never imagined that I’d one day be walking around a clothing store on a date with Rosa, the dining hall waitress who was old enough to be my mother. Of course, I had a good reason for it. It had started when I’d bumped into the Valkyries on my way back to the stables with Malto...

“Does anyone want to help me pick out some clothes?” I asked the ladies. “I promise I’ll return the favor.”

Unsurprisingly, not one of them knew the first thing about clothes shopping, instead offering to join me in buying armor or weapons. Most of them didn’t see what was wrong with my usual robe. And here I hadn’t thought it was possible for them to be any more masculine after seeing their ferocity at the barbeque.

I had to report to Catherine after that and asked her the same thing, but she was too busy. After one last plea for help, she told me about Rosa.

“She buys the casual wear for me and Her Holiness.”

“You don’t do that yourselves?”

“The only shops I go to are for food, weapons, armor, or magic items. Fashion’s not exactly my forte. Rosa used to be the pope’s attendant, though, so that’s her area of expertise.”

“I see. Well, I’ll try asking her.”

“Good luck.”

And that was the story.

Back to the present: the ladies were flying around, taking my measurements and tossing clothes at me. Button-up shirts as far as the eye could see, tunics and belts, pants of both the fitted and practical variety. My fashion fate was in their hands right down to my boots, as well it should have been, given I hadn’t seen my own face in who knew how long.

Rosa, Anna, and her daughter made sure that my style fit my looks well (at the cost of my own preferences). Anna’s daughter was twenty-two, married, and clearly expecting fairly soon. She asked me to cast Heal on her, something about Saint Weirdo’s blessing, so I obliged, focusing my magic through my staff.

Before I knew it, the makeover was done. It would still take a little over two weeks for the tailoring to be finished, so I paid in advance before Rosa and I left.

“Thank you for coming with me today,” I said.

“And thank you for treating me.”

“Please, don’t mention it. Should I walk you back?”

Rosa laughed. “Now, I’m not *that* frail. Don’t waste your time on me.”

“If you say so. Careful on your way home.”

With Rosa gone and no escort on my heels, I felt freer than ever and immediately made for the magic item shop that Grantz had told me about.

“This looks like the place,” I muttered. “Should be some interesting stuff, if what he said is true.”

The place reminded me of a used book store I’d frequented in Jinbocho, back in Tokyo. The instant I opened the door, I froze. A golem politely bowed and

greeted me in a voice that seemed to come from nowhere.

“WELCOME TO COMMEDIA ARTIFACTS.”

Quiet stomping came from the back, and then a young woman with short hair and glasses appeared.

“Welcome to Commedia Artifacts!”

“Uh, hi, this is a magic item store, I assume?”

“Yep. Something catch your eye? Oh, these?” She tapped her spectacles. “They’re called glasses. They help you see things easier from far away, or from close up if you’ve got old folks who have trouble with that. Made them myself.”

I couldn’t believe it. Another reincarnated soul? This close by? If she wasn’t one of the reincarnated, she was at least involved with one. Thankfully, I’d decided on how to handle this type of situation well in advance.

“Wow, that’s incredible. I hear you have lots of unique inventions for sale here. Would you mind showing me a few?”

“I’d love to!”

The girl, who looked to be about my age, beamed and proceeded to explain her creations with great passion. It didn’t take long for me to be absolutely positive that she was one of the reincarnated. All of her creations were conventional appliances from Earth, reinvented using magic in place of electricity. She even had hairdryers, washing machines, and vacuums, which I really didn’t need, although the temptation was real.

I wound up buying basically everything that caught my eye: a magic stove, magic water purifier, magic cooler, magic heater, magic tub (with heating!), magic garbage disposal, magic air mattress, magic blender, and a magic juicer, to name a few. The damage was eleven gold pieces, and boy was I satisfied. The girl almost seemed ready to bow down in thanks.

What would happen if I introduced her to Trett? I wondered. I mentioned a certain item that I was interested in having made.

“I’m flattered you’d ask me,” she replied, “but I still have a ways to go before I’ll be able to try something like that.”

She explained that crafting magic items required various things, like magic stones of the necessary affinity and prerequisite skill or job levels in the magic artificer class.

“See this? I wanted to turn appraisal skills into an item, but I’m just not good enough yet,” she said, drooping her shoulders.

There wasn’t much I could do for her without knowing exactly what it was that she wanted to appraise, but I could at least be a deep-pocketed customer. This wasn’t going to be the last I saw of this girl named Rina. I could feel it.

I would continue to visit her shop occasionally over the next two months.

*

The veiled woman in the familiar, vast hall listened to me speak, then replied in her hushed tone. “Yes, what you say is sound, though I am amazed you have never so much as set foot inside a clinic.”

Her Holiness’s attendants stared at me in shock.

“I started out at an Adventurer’s Guild, after all.”

I’d been going about it all wrong. I couldn’t learn about how clinics were run without actually going to one. Hearing about the differences between domestic and foreign clinics wasn’t going to cut it—I had to experience it for myself.

“Would that I could assign you somewhere near, but I fear there will be no clinic in the Holy City that does not know your name. However, there is one run by the very man who sent you to these walls. Know you of whom I speak?”

“The clinic in Merratoni.”

“Indeed. To Merratoni by horseback it is roughly a two-day journey, if I remember correctly. You can be swiftly recalled if need be, and reports will reach my ears quickly.”

Was it that close? I took her word for it. I was more worried about whether it was smart for me to start healing there again, especially now that my regular Heal spells were on par with, if not greater than, an average practitioner’s Middle Heal.

“You’re sure that’s a wise decision?” I asked.

“As wise as any other. The die was cast when I bestowed the mantle of S-rank upon you. Any path we choose will come with difficulty.” The gentle mystique of her voice carried the weight of the past. “Whatever it takes...to restore our glory.”

“I understand. I’ll leave the arrangements to you.”

“It shall be done. Ah, another thing, Luciel. Your first destination one year from now will be Yenice. Add this to your studies.”

Er, the beastfolk country? That was fine by me, but was it fine with the human supremacists in the Church? “Has their Healer’s Guild been established yet?”

“Not as there once was. Complications rendered it defunct, but I truly believe you will create a sound foundation for its return. The reins of Yenice’s guild and its clinics will be in your hands.”

“Pardon?” *Yes, hi, Miss Pope? I have a question. What the hell are you talking about?*

“Take the reins, Luciel.”

That does not answer my question. “I’ll, uh, have people to help me, right?” This was not happening on my own. Nu-uh.

“But of course. Your duty is only to see the foundation laid. Then your grasp of both clinics and guild will be firm and your abilities prepared for the journey to come. I have the utmost of faith in you.”

Her Holiness was like a master chess player, thinking a dozen moves ahead. Or I was just that dull.

I nodded hesitantly. “I’ll do what I can.”

I left the pope’s chambers and heaved the biggest sigh of my life. My next stop would take me straight into the den of my first enemy. What was his name again? Botticelli? Bottiscrooge? Whatever. I just hoped things would go okay. And right after what’s-his-name, it was straight to the land of independence: Yenice, a vast nation to the south of Shurule (Illumasia and Luburk were to the north).

“Now, we’ll need supplies and stuff for the journey. I can ask Master about all that when we get to Merratoni.”

Having a firm vision of the future was important, and although I was still in the preliminary stages, I knew what information I needed and the things I had to prepare. I couldn’t get stuck focusing on elements I couldn’t control.

“Oh, I nearly forgot.”

Jord and the others would need to be filled in. But first, I decided to jump into the labyrinth for a bit to clear my head. I’d been coming and going for a while over the past month, taking out the few monsters that still crept up, and the Illusion Staff made everything a cakewalk. Floor thirty was my current stomping grounds for training.

The boost given to my magic by the Illusion Staff made my Purification spells encompass the entirety of the massive thirty-by-thirty-meter boss rooms. The first time I tried it, it nearly gave me a heart attack. Even Area Barrier blew me away, and all that did was buff my defenses a little. It was almost scary how OP this weapon was.

I blocked the blow with my shield and countered with the now-transformed blade. This, once a week, was the extent of my exorcist duties.

“This many level-ups and I’m still no match for a paladin or templar. There’s definitely more to it.”

I cut down the sneering wraith as it drew near, absorbing its experience points before doubling back. Wraiths provided a ton of XP, so I was already level fifty-five. I couldn’t help but think about how much higher my level would have been if I’d known the truth about Substance X from the start, but the truth was, it had saved my life on more than one occasion. I always kept several barrels of it in my magic bag, just in case. Once I stopped being able to level up so easily, I planned on going back to boosting my stat growth, skills, and resistances.

Four measly points never felt like a big boost to my stats when I leveled up, to be honest, but then again, my stats had all more than doubled since level one. And I couldn’t forget the golden rule: numbers weren’t everything in a fight. Being able to *use* those abilities to the fullest was just as important, shrinking the gap between what you could physically do and what your brain let you do.

When I'd asked Catherine about it and whether it was a factor in people losing fights in spite of superior stats, she had told me to stop wasting time thinking and spend more time fighting, then promptly tossed me into one of the knights' joint events, where I was quickly curb-stomped.

"And they all said Area Barrier was cheating because it made everyone's defense too strong."

As a result, the use of Area Barrier, Area Middle Heal, and Area High Heal had been strictly forbidden in group sparring matches. Apparently, people didn't like the idea of the Knights of Shurule turning into a necromantic army of instantly healing zombies. In fact, it was just last month that I'd shed a few tears over the new nickname this had earned me: Captain Sadist. Her Holiness, too, had forbidden me from using Sanctuary Circle or Extra Heal in any situation other than emergencies or mortal peril.

I dithered over what to spend my 108 SP on—Monsieur Luck's older brother or more magic affinities—then eventually settled on asking my master for his advice and left the labyrinth.

Two months passed in a flash. Soon, my trusty steed, Forêt Noire, and I set out for Merratoni.

It was the fourth day of our journey, and I'd jammed my brain full of information on the state of Merratoni's Healer's Guild and its clinics over the last two months. The ride was easy and smooth, thanks in part to the stirrups I'd had someone craft and my constant casting of Heal and Purification.

We traveled back along the same route I'd first traversed on my way to the Holy City, stopping at various villages on the way. I wanted my companions to see people and things beyond the walls of the capital.

At every town, I taught what I could, showed them my own vision for the craft, and prepared them for the reshaping of the greedy healer.

11 — A Triumphant Return

I realized something too late, just as the silhouette of Merratoni came into view.

“I forgot to shut everyone up before we left.”

“Don’t sweat it. I’m curious to see the welcome they’ve got waiting for you. Nothing wrong with being loved, is there?” Jord smiled at me as I sulked.

“Sure, I guess.”

We trotted on and the city walls peaked over the horizon.

“I’m back,” I muttered.

As we approached the gate, something appeared off. Really off. It was positively overflowing with people, like some kind of citywide parade was going on.

“I knew you were popular after those riots, but that’s gotta be, what, the whole city turning out for you?”

“Yeah, uh... I’m shocked myself. All I did was live at the Adventurer’s Guild for a while. Wait, maybe they’re Saint Weirdo’s Day patients.”

“Guess that makes them our patients too,” Jord laughed, easing the tension of the team behind us. “We’re going to be busy.”

No plain old healer like me deserved a parade like this, but here it was nonetheless. I supposed that was something to be proud of. Without letting it go to my head, of course, unless I wanted to experience a layer of hell with my master.

“That mini arclink crystal you got is sure going to come in handy.”

“Right? Her Holiness pulled out all the stops.” I felt sort of like a superstar, and if that sounded a little conceited, that’s probably because it was. It was hard to stay levelheaded with a throng of people waiting for me.

We soon reached our destination.

“Welcome back, Mister Luciel. May I see your identification?” the sentry asked. He was the same guard from four years earlier—the first person I’d spoken to here.

I dismounted Forêt and presented my card. “Right here. I’m surprised you remember me.”

“I couldn’t possibly forget. Everyone in town knows your name.” He took my card, carefully looked it over, and returned it to me. “Welcome home, Saint Weirido.”

Where in the world had he learned that name? He stepped aside to let us pass before I could ask, and familiar faces were awaiting us as we stepped into the city.

“Is that my idiot apprentice over there?” my master shouted. “You’d better not be slacking on your training.”

“Of course not. I knew you wouldn’t let me off easy if I did. You can never be too prepared, right?”

“Couldn’t have said it better myself! How about we finish this down in the training—”

“Slow down there,” Galba blessedly interjected. Brod rolled his eyes in frustration. “It’s nice to see you again, Luciel. Take care of what you need to do at the Healer’s Guild, and find an inn for your people. There’s time for catching up later.”

“Listen here,” Brod added, “if we’re gonna throw you a welcome party, I wanna see this Saint Weirido’s Day of yours, understand?”

I laughed. “You think you can intimidate me? And wait, how do you know about Saint Weirido’s Day?”

“Monica helps get the Healer’s Guild to spill things every now and then.”

“You’re *using* her?!” And what was the guild doing letting that sort of information out?

“Hey, it was her and Nanaella’s idea. Don’t look at me like that; I’m just the middle man here. Anyway, what’s the plan?”

At least they hadn't learned anything very important, although I would've told the girls all about it if they'd just asked me. Regarding "the plan," though... There were too many people present to handle it on my own.

"I'll gladly hold Saint Weirdo's Day here, but on condition that my unit can join me."

"Not a problem as long as you call the shots. That settle it? Good. Now hurry up and go finish what you gotta do at the Healer's Guild."

"I'll be back soon."

Crowds of people showered us with kind words on our way through the city. The rest of my team was more shocked than anything, but it filled me with a kind of pride. I couldn't help but smile.

People continued to call out to us, even when we reached the guild.

"I get the feeling people like you," Jord laughed. "We might end up more comfortable here than we ever were at HQ."

"That's Merratoni for you. On the other hand, we won't be able to train with the Valkyries."

"A very good point."

I opened the guildhall door and led everyone inside. "Feels like it's been forever."

I'd known this place would be something of an oasis for everyone, but from my first step inside, I almost couldn't believe my eyes. Even more so than when we'd first arrived in town. Hanging from the ceiling of the usually quiet and subdued hall was an absurdly gaudy banner that read, "Welcome home, Luciel the S-rank, pride of the Merratoni branch!"

I froze. Then applause erupted. And just like that, I was in the awkward situation of desperately wanting to leave but tragically being unable to. It took immense effort to keep the distress from showing on my face.

"It's wonderful to see you again, Luciel. Or should I say *sir*?" Kururu greeted me.

“Oh, hello. The Healer’s Guild is looking...different these days. How do you know I’m S-rank?”

She giggled. “The last branch director ditched everything and ran when he heard you were coming back. And I was next in line, so here I am.”

“You’re the new director?!”

“Thanks to you. It sure helped me figure out what brought you back here.”

“I didn’t do anything. You earned that position yourself. If anything, you should thank Lumina.”

“Oh, I will. But I really wouldn’t have made it to guildmaster at thirty without you. Can you believe that? Thirty! I’m the youngest female director in the world! And the raise; gods, *the raise*! I could just kiss you!”

“I-I’m...I’m good, thanks. I’d like to take care of our paperwork now.” The drastic spike in her energy made me want to cringe.

“You’re never any fun. Is that the secret to reaching S-rank? Being a spoilsport?”

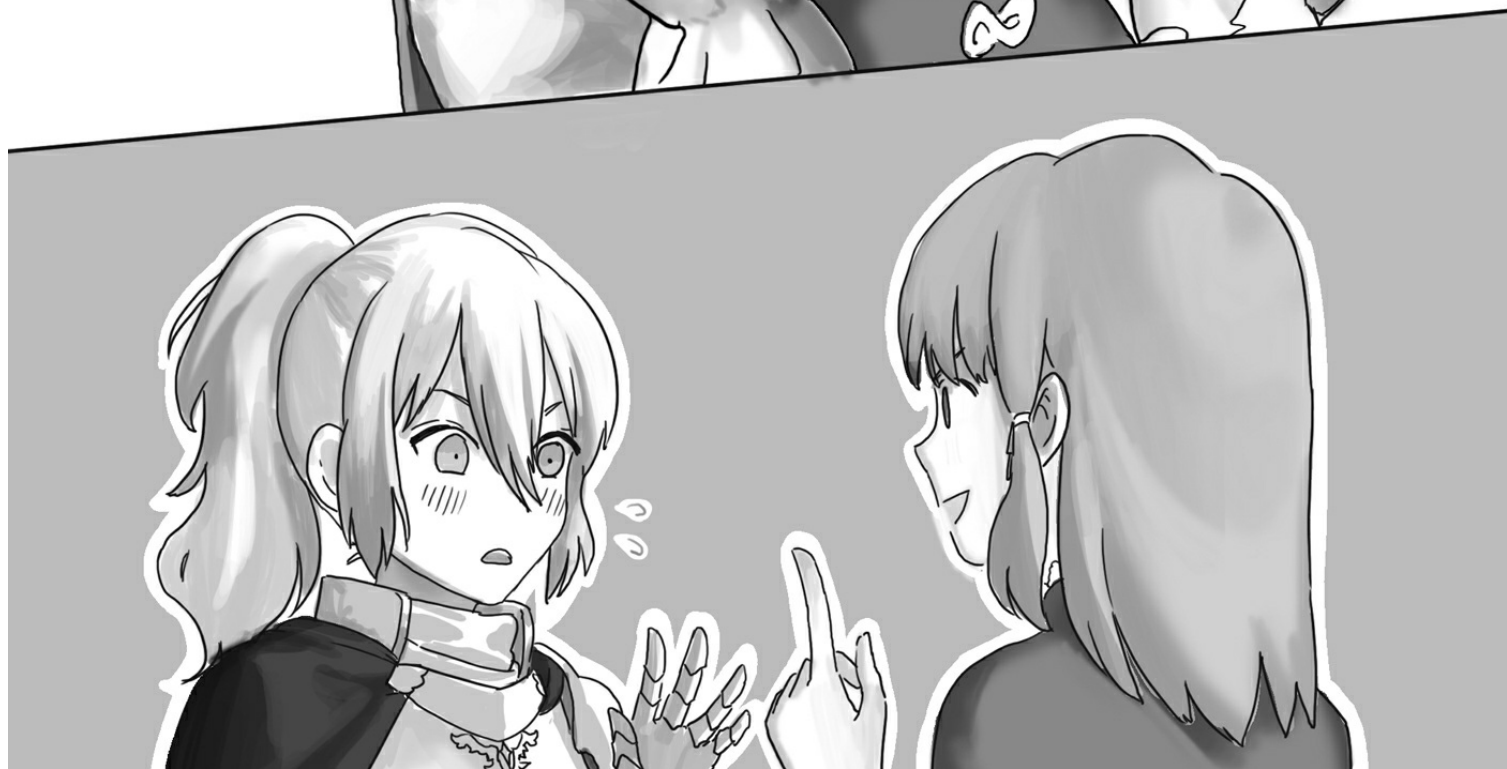
My poor sanity can’t take much more.

I looked around and noticed way more staff around than during my last visit. “There’re a lot more people here than I remember. It used to just be you after Monica left. How many do you have now?”

“Four, recently. Things are only going to get busier, so I thought I might as well train a few protégés while I can.”

“Not a bad idea.”

I absentmindedly glanced around, then my eyes stopped on one of the receptionists. Her black hair and dark eyes struck a chord of familiarity in me. Something about her felt old, nostalgic.



“Hold it right there. I know Estia’s cute, but you’re not about to steal her like you did Monica. Got it?”

“Huh? What? Oh, right, of course not. I’m here to fix things, not make it harder for you guys.”

“I should hope so.”

“Yeah, it’s just, you don’t often see hair or eyes that dark. I was just curious. In a good way, I mean.”

“I guess I can understand that.”

It wasn’t long before we were done with the formalities and on our way to the Adventurer’s Guild.

*

Meanwhile, at the clinic that would be hosting Luciel and his companions, Bottaculli had flown into a rage.

“Why?! Why is he here?! Why is he coming to *my clinic*?! The boy must have a grudge against me! Yes, that’s it! And that damn guildmaster probably skipped town with the money he was supposed to pass along—*my* money! What the hell am I going to do?! Well?! Think, you buffoons!”

The healer’s slaves and hired bodyguards simply stood there, subject to his rage. To be transferred to Church Headquarters typically meant that one wouldn’t be coming back for at least five years or more. Or *ever*, in the case of those sent away for causing trouble. In spite of that, Luciel had returned after only two years. It simply wasn’t logical. Bottaculli was convinced the new S-ranker was after him with his newfound authority.

The portly man’s veins bulged, his blood pressure skyrocketing as he racked his brain for ways to get one over on the conniving upstart. The bodyguards present were new and hadn’t heard of Luciel before, but they knew well that killing a beloved S-rank healer would put their own lives at risk.

Bottaculli’s slaves, on the other hand, were shocked to see their master in such uncharacteristic disarray and knew exactly what to do. It was time to put their plan into action.

While shadows moved and motives clashed, it was Saint Weirdo's Day in the training grounds of a certain Adventurer's Guild.

12 — The Mountain Peak at the Welcome Party

Another chaotic welcome awaited us at the Adventurer's Guild. My partners looked so perplexed that they didn't know what to do with themselves.

"Sir, what's going on in this town?" one of them asked. "Why are we getting this treatment too?"

"That's what living somewhere for a few years does. This place is like home to me," I replied. "I'm sure other healers would get along with adventurers much better if they took the time to heal at guilds like I did."

I suddenly spotted a familiar set of ears and her companion.

"Welcome back, Luciel," they said together.

"Thanks, Nanaella, Monica. How have you two been?"

"Doing well," Monica beamed.

"You haven't been writing lately, so we were starting to get worried," Nanaella pouted.

"Sorry, I had so much I wanted to tell you, but every time I tried to write something, I could never think of anything. I'm glad you're both getting by, though."

"What about me, huh? No nice words for your master?"

"You're the least of my concerns. You'd get by fine anywhere as long as you had something to fight," I responded flatly.

"Someone's learned how to talk shit. Wanna take this downstairs?" Brod challenged.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, at least let me give a show to all the people here to see us."

"Saint Weirdo's Day, huh?"

"Exactly. I'm going to take care of all the injured first."

"How much?"

“It’s on the house today. I’m here to change people’s image of the greedy healer. Pope’s orders. Oh, but a meal would be nice.”

Brod huffed. “All right, set up shop in the training grounds.”

“Thanks.”

I didn’t have much time to talk to the girls at the moment, but I’d have plenty of chances from now on. I followed Brod downstairs.

A pale light shimmered from the magic circle beneath me and my patients, sealing lacerations and resetting bones. Everyone watching, including the Healer Pentad, was stunned speechless. The Illusion Staff decreased my magic consumption and elevated my abilities far beyond their normal levels.

“Since when’d you get that good at magic?” Brod asked.

“Hey, I’m not all bark. A lot’s happened, and I’d like to think I’ve improved as a healer a little,” I said. “Now, was that the last of them?”

“Looks like it. You know, you’ve got a weird bunch with you.”

“How so?”

Months with my retinue had desensitized me, in a way. I’d stopped noticing the little changes in my team.

“Never thought I’d see healers give beastfolk the time of day. Reminds me of you from a few years back.”

“They’re just patients to us. And we all know you’re here to keep us safe if anyone acts up.”

“Hm. Done? C’mere and face this way.”

“What for?”

I turned with Brod towards a group of young adventurers about my age.

“Hey, newbies! This is the healer who worked here a couple years ago. If you weren’t here back then, you’ve probably never seen him, but I want you all to watch. We’re gonna see just how strong our old pal’s gotten.”

“What? Right now? What about food?”

“Relax, we’ll be done before it’s time to eat, and Gulgar knows we’ll be late. Don’tcha know the hero always shows up at the last minute?”

“You’re impossible sometimes, Master. But while we’re here, I do want you to get my guard into fighting shape.”

“Yeah? I’ll have to test ’em out later, but you’re up first.”

“There’s no getting out of this, is there?”

“Hell no. Let’s go, hand-to-hand. Come at me.”

“I guess we’re doing this now.”

I activated Physical Enhancement, felt the magic whirling inside me, and cast Attack Barrier before launching myself straight at Brod. Then the world turned upside down and a violent *thud* reverberated off the walls.

“Not a bad tackle, but you gotta be able to knock the guy down or you’ll be wide open.”

Throbbing pain pulsed from my back. That had been one helluva right hook.

I winced. “H-Heal!”

I charged low, towards his legs, and pushed. With one big surge, he started to actually budge. All the strength in the world was powerless against good old gravity. I quickly thrust my right arm beneath his waist, grabbed his right shoulder with my left hand, and lifted him up. Just as I prepared to body slam him to the ground, something wrapped itself around my neck and, before I knew it, *I* was the one with my head against the floor.

I silently free cast Heal, then immediately tensed my stomach, noticing Brod’s shadow on the ground and anticipating a kick to come. Whatever it was, it blew me across the room, and I only came to a stop after bouncing off the ground a few times.

“Oof, why did you slam my head straight into the ground there?” I griped between grimaces. “That’s how you straight up kill someone! I can’t heal death!”

That kind of DDT would get you banned from pro wrestling in no time. Heads and hard floors were never meant to go together.

“Don’t play with me. I know you’re still good to go. And looks like you *did* get a bit stronger. Now we can really have some fun.”

“You’re insane.”

“Get ready!”

“Yeah, yeah.”

Brod vanished and I instantly went flying straight up. Well, to be accurate, he wasn’t vanishing, just moving incredibly fast. Or so I wanted to believe. I looked down and thought I had him but only for a split second, because the next, he had my legs and threw me to the ground, then followed with a kick straight down. The guy was a monster, the way he moved so fast in midair.

The pain of hitting the ground vanished with a Heal as I quickly rolled to the side.

“Good to see you still know how to react to hits you can and can’t take. I knew you were my apprentice for a reason.”

Where was this dude’s off-switch, and how could I avoid flipping it back on in the future? I could tell he was still holding back.

“I did all that leveling up and you’re still leagues ahead of me. How much further do I have to go? Master, what level are you? Just for reference, of course. Purely for reference.”

“Don’t gimme that. Didn’t I tell you not to focus on numbers?”

“Right, and I promise I’m not. I just thought knowing would make it easier to find a goal to work towards.”

“A goal? Fine. I’m level 451.”

What an absolute beast. Catherine and Lumina didn’t hold a candle to him.

“Wow. Well, the taller the mountain, the better it feels to reach the top.”

Brod cackled, then said, “That’s enough chatter. Come at me with everything you’ve got and more.”

“You asked for it!”

I threw myself against the wall that was Brod for over an hour and lost count

of how many times I had to recast Heal and Attack Barrier. After that, we pulled out the blades and sparred with swords. The spectators were a bit rowdy, but knowing that a second of hesitation could be the difference between life and death, I managed to stay focused (and even improved my ability to do so in the process).

I made it out in the end with only one particularly bad gash, which I immediately fixed with High Heal.

“This is a good enough place to call it. Let’s have that party.”

“Sounds good to me.”

I spoke with my pale-faced team afterwards. They’d most likely realized that their training here was going to be nothing like back at HQ. The newbie adventurers who’d watched our fight seemed blown away, their preconceptions about healers having been completely uprooted.

The Healer Pentad were also amazed by the lengths that one of their own had gone to. But during the match, I’d noticed a younger man with a dour expression among some of the older adventurers who knew me. His impression of the fight wasn’t favorable.

“Showed up by a damn healer,” I heard him mutter. “I was *chosen*. Not him. Play your goody-two-shoes act all you want; you’ll never beat me in a fight.”

I turned towards the vitriolic voice, but the man was nowhere to be seen.

The party was held in the dining hall. Food was lined up buffet-style, and all the chairs had been removed to offer as much space for as many people as possible. Some of the Healer’s Guild staff who’d stopped by were a little huffy about having to eat standing up, but they kept their complaints quiet in front of me.

“All right, folks,” Brod called out, “your favorite healer’s back home, and that means getting healed’s gonna get easier. But he’s here to study up on clinics, so he won’t be around in the afternoons. He’ll be working over at Bottaculli’s place.”

The crowd erupted into boos. I hadn’t even known that booing was a thing in

this world.

“He won’t be here all day, but he’ll be living in the guildhall for now. Everyone’s free to come by if you’re in a bad way.” The booing changed to cheers. “All right, the floor’s yours, Luciel. No alcohol for you, though.”

“Um, hi. I’m Luciel,” I began. “It was a long journey from Church Headquarters, so I really appreciate you all hosting this party for us. As I look back on everything, I realize just how important my two years here were. It was the foundation that made it possible for someone as utterly average as me to become an S-rank healer. It’s funny, because it was fear that brought me here. I was so scared of adventurers, I couldn’t live my life without thinking of all the ways I might die. It was that fear, the fear of what might happen if I ever failed to heal someone, that motivated me to keep improving.”

I took a break before continuing. “But then I realized I wasn’t the only one afraid of dying. We all are. And I started to see how kind everyone was. They gave me clothes and gifts, and the world stopped being so scary. There were a few times when it felt like I was being held prisoner, to be honest, but regardless, this is where it all began for me. Here’s to all the guild staff and adventurers who gave me a home. I’ll keep on facing forward, and maybe someday I’ll be able to repay you all. Until then, I hope you’ll put up with me and my new team. I know I’m keeping this a little short, but thank you again. Everyone.”

“No, that’s long enough!” Brod cut in. “Anyway, raise your mugs! Cheers!”

“Cheers!” the room roared.

Things got loud pretty quickly after that. Gulgar enticed my team and the new adventurers, who’d watched my earlier match, with mugs of lighter (presumably diluted) Substance X, saying, “Hey, wanna get stronger?”

While adventurers went down one after another, my unit stood tall, already used to the stuff.

Gulgar grinned. “Look at ’em, losin’ to healers. Shoulda known your team would’ve already had a few mugs.”

“At least one a day.”

The chef continued churning out glass after glass, and the room quickly began to reek, so I had to save everyone with a Purification spell. Gulgar couldn't hide the fire in his eyes, having found so many new toys to play with. He was also particularly pleased with himself for being able to stop everyone's grumbling about the lack of seating with his unparalleled cooking.

Throughout the dining hall, theories were spreading about what my nickname, "Saint Weirdo," really meant. It was almost too much for my poor mind to take.

"Obviously, it means he's a misfit who uses holy magic. 'Saint,' 'holy,' it fits."

"Nah, I think it's more the fact he's just weird in general."

"You think? I figured it was more about, y'know, his fetishes. Like, he's a great, saintly person, but man is he a freak."

"What if it's..."

The idea crafting would go on well into the night, dredging up even other people's nicknames. Like Brod's "the Whirlwind" and "the Demon Instructor," Gulgar's "the Bear Chef" and "the Immovable," and Galba's "the Recluse."

Speaking of those three, they'd invited me to join them for drinks.

"You've got training tomorrow," Brod said. "You can have that drink with me when it's time for you to leave."

"He's got a point. And you're heading right into the belly of the beast too. You'll need to be ready," Galba added.

Gulgar shoved a plate at me. "Forget drinkin'. I've got a new dish! Eat up!"

I reluctantly brought a bite to my mouth, slightly frustrated about the delay in getting to have my first drink, and immediately regretted it.

"This is what I think it is, isn't it?"

"You got it! Wanted to see if it could be worked into food or not, and you're the only one who can drink it, so I figured you'd be the only one to eat it."

"What am I, your test subject?! *You* can't even drink the stuff, so stop making food out of it!"

“Sometimes you’ve gotta crack a few eggs to make an omelet.”

“This isn’t an omelet.”

“Just eat it. It’s starting to stink like hell,” Brod grimaced.

“I believe in you,” Galba added.

“I swear...” I muttered with a sigh. “Fine, I’ll try it again.”

I cut off another piece of the Substance X-drizzled meat and took a bite.

“So?” Gulgar pressed. “Palatable?”

“Not in a million years. The heat makes it taste even worse. It’s like an explosion of awful in my mouth.”

“Ah, well. Try this one next.”

“There...there are more?”

“Nine, actually.”

“Maybe if we strike a deal. You teach me some of your recipes, and I’ll keep eating.”

“That’s how you wanna play it, eh?” *G-Gulgar?* “All right, have it your way. One recipe per dish. And I’ve got a lot more where that came from.”

“That crazy look in your eye reminds me way too much of Brod.”

“Gulgar’s always had a curious mind,” his younger brother noted. “I’m sure he’s just happy he gets to try his experiments on someone they won’t be wasted on.”

That was all well and good, but Galba showed no intention of trying to stop his sibling’s mayhem.

“We’re heading home for the night, everyone,” I heard someone say. I turned around and saw Nanaella and Monica.

“Thank you for helping with all this. And for cleaning my room,” I said.

“There’s not a lot we can do for you, but you make the guild a better place just by being here. I hope we’ll still see you around when you’re not working.”

“Let us know if there’s anything you need,” Nanaella said.

“Thank you. Oh, I’ve got something. Would you mind giving me a haircut some time?”

They grinned and nodded. “Sure!”

“You’re killing me over here,” my master interrupted. “You done batting eyelashes at each other?”

“Need some Substance X to wash it down?” Gulgar offered.

“Ah, youth,” Galba said wistfully.

The girls hastily bowed and left in embarrassment.

“You seem pretty calm,” Brod commented, looking annoyed that his teasing hadn’t affected me.

“There’s no reason to be nervous. I know everyone here.” I was already past the awkward adolescent phase. One puberty had been more than enough, thanks.

He paused for a moment. “You’ve changed.”

“Have I? I guess time will do that to someone, but I’m more surprised by how *you’ve* all changed.”

“You’re right. Time changes people. But not everyone,” Galba said. “Not people like Bottaculli.”

“I actually wanted to ask you about him. What do you know?”

Galba smiled and glanced at Brod.

“Well, he’s not after your life, at least, but watch your ass around his slaves,” Brod explained.

“How does he have slaves in this country?” The slave trade was outlawed in Shurule, but I’d never seen any myself and had no way of knowing if slavery was unofficially still around.

“You’re right to be surprised, but the fact is, Galba’s sources say he buys more every year. Treats ’em like garbage, and their leader’s planning a revolt.”

I recalled something I’d read in the past: a slave revolting was akin to him forfeiting his own life. Vague unease surfaced in the back of my mind.

“Wait, aren’t they bound by magic to follow orders?” By some kind of collar, I thought.

“Yes,” Galba replied. “Normally, yes. But rumors are going around about slaves who are actually defying their masters. And to complicate matters, these aren’t people from some back alley deal. They were sold legally.”

“Doesn’t that break the slave’s contract?”

“*Normally*, yes. No one knows how, but they manage to violate their pact of servitude while somehow leaving it intact.”

“Is that even possible?”

“That’s what I’m trying to find out. In any case, word’s gotten to Bottaculli, so he’s been amassing mercenaries, and the paranoia’s taken a toll on his health, from what I can tell. He’s been buying medicinals for blood pressure.”

“Medicinals? It’s not something he can fix with magic? Wonder if he’s sick.” Extra Heal could probably fix anything from tumors to brain damage, but... I hesitated.

“I’m sure he’s finding it hard to sleep at night when his most trusted servants could stab him in the back. Well, the one thing I can say with certainty is that he blacked out when he heard you were coming back.”

“Really?” I laughed awkwardly. “For the record, I wasn’t the one who chose his clinic. That was Her Holiness. I guess I didn’t *object*, per se, but still.”

“I believe you. Just be careful and stay on your guard, okay? Don’t take any meals he offers.”

It was clear that Galba was not someone I wanted to fight an information war with. “I’m not worried about poison having any effect on me, but I should probably keep an eye on my team.” I didn’t want any blame falling on me while I had the ability to cure people.

“Right. There’s just something that bugs me. The thing about all this that scares me most is how in every instance of a slave harming their master, not a single one remembers how they managed to do it. We’re running blind here.”

“They just forgot?”

“Anything and everything involving the incident.”

Then the one behind it couldn't have been a person. Who had that kind of power? If there had been other occurrences like this in the past, the Church would have known.

“So, how'd you find that squad o' yours anyway?” Brod jumped in with a tonally inconsistent smirk. I could tell from his cheery attitude that he'd decided to put my companions through the wringer, but if he didn't know how to hold back, I could kiss my team goodbye.

“They just sympathized with my ideas, that's all.”

“They look pretty sturdy.”

“It took a few months of Substance X and grueling training filled with nonstop healing to get to that point.”

“I'm surprised you didn't scare 'em off.”

I couldn't tell him that I'd used girls and barbeques as bait, for fear of incurring the demon's wrath. You never knew when he'd come out. I had to come up with a decent way of phrasing it.

“I took a page from your book. Just like how Gulgar's food carried me through your training, I pulled them through theirs by having joint sessions with the strongest knights.” There. That wasn't technically a lie.

My master sighed. “You sure grew up, kid. I remember when Bottaculli used to be worth a damn like you, but money made him crazy. Hate him or love him, truth is, he made one hell of an enterprise with his clinic. Still makes me gag to call him a healer, though.”

Thank god. He believed me. “I knew he couldn't have been born like that.”

“Nah, he's treated us before, matter of fact. Back in our adventuring days.”

“Well, that sounds interesting.” Real-life stories and experiences as an adventurer on the verge of SS-rank weren't the sort of thing you'd hear just any old bard sing tales about.

“It's the past.”

“I suppose. I want to see what I can do about Bottaculli, though. Maybe I can do some good.”

“Don’t you gotta go to bed? You’re gonna want to stay awake for training tomorrow.”

“First thing in the morning?”

“You wanna surpass me or not? Your master’s got a lot to teach and not a lot of time to teach it.”

It was at that moment I understood the true meaning of putting one’s foot in one’s mouth. And how arrogant I still was. Well, no use crying over spilled milk. We talked all through the rest of the welcome party, and then it came to a close.

On my way to my room downstairs, I passed the front desk and said hello to the receptionist there, who jumped in surprise and replied with a light bow. But what was there to be so afraid of?

The resting room (aka my makeshift bedroom), was exactly as I’d left it and had been kept perfectly clean. Frankly, it made me a little emotional.

“Better get to sleep. Got my first day at Bottaculli’s tomorrow.” I took out my angel’s pillow and flopped into bed. “So many receptionists married off so quickly. And the new one’s scared of me for some reason. Whatever, time to sleep.”

I closed my eyes and recounted the day’s events in the short time it took for slumber to take me.

13 — The Return of Merratoni's Top Healer

I yawned. "Now, this feels nostalgic."

I got up, did my stretches and magic exercises, then slowly opened the door. My master towered nearby in all his intimidating glory.

"What are you doing?"

He clicked his tongue in frustration. "Thought I'd catch you slacking. Good. C'mon, we've got laps to do. Go all out, full-on Physical Enhancement."

"Yes, sir!"

And so we ran, and ran, and ran some more. When I'd watched runners on TV in my past life, I'd never understood what it was that drove them, why simply watching them could stir some sort of feeling in others. Now I thought I finally got it. At least somewhat. It was because they believed their efforts and struggles had a purpose, that by demolishing the walls that held them back, they'd find something beyond that. Because although our experiences are ultimately our own, that special something that stirs when seeing another give themselves entirely to a passion exists in all of us, and it yearns to be free.

"Swing those arms! Raise those legs! Forget doubts! Forget limits! Show me what you're made of, and be the man who spits on talent!"

I made it through my master's training and wanted to keep moving forward. I punctuated that resolve by tearing through Gulgar's breakfast.

It was delicious.

It didn't take long for my team and Forêt Noire to reach the three-story clinic. It was just as large, if not larger, than the Adventurer's Guild.

"Are all clinics this big?" I asked. "Do they keep inpatients?"

"This one's definitely bigger than what I'm used to," Jord replied. "Apparently, the third floor's the director's living quarters, second floor's for the slaves and healers, and the first is where the treatment rooms are. And the mercenaries."

"Mercenaries? Clinics hire soldiers?"

“I can’t say they *all* do, but most probably have guards of some kind.”

“Most, huh?” I echoed quietly.

“No one would do a runner these days, but there used to be lots of people who’d only partially pay their bill to avoid the criminal charge on their cards. Clinics never stopped being paranoid, even after things changed.”

Suddenly I could imagine the kinds of ruffians who might have led the healers down their current path. This called for some adjustments to the guidelines for sure.

“Anyway, let’s get going.”

I opened the door and immediately heard shouting.

“Hold on, Master Bottaculli! The healers will be with you soon!”

Before I could process even the slightest feeling of shock, I saw a man, an adventurer or mercenary perhaps, come stumbling down the stairs carrying someone on his back. He hurried through a door labeled “Examination Room” without sparing us so much as a glance.

“Keep him alive! He hasn’t paid us for the month yet!” a shout echoed from within. No reply came, and the voice grew more impatient. “You call yourselves healers?! It’s just a damn dagger wound! If you can’t heal it, bring some medicine or something, I don’t care what!”

Bottaculli’s cut must have been deep.

“Well, a life’s a life. Can’t just ignore one,” I said. “Jord, come with me.”

“Understood. I can’t tell if we have good or bad timing here.”

“I’d like to think good. Palaragus, Piazza, stay with us. Everyone else, stand by outside the clinic.”

I barged into the examination room and nearly staggered against the thick tension in the air. All eyes fell on me, but I ignored them and proceeded to the bed where Bottaculli lay. His robe was stained crimson, but the wound wasn’t actually all that life-threatening, so I cast Heal just to stabilize him. The blood loss had turned his complexion pale, and he seemed to be barely conscious.

I looked around the room, considering what to make of this situation, and noticed three men who looked like healers staring at me.

“Is there something on my face? Oh, right, introductions. I’m Luciel, the healer from Headquarters who’s supposed to start studying here.”

“Um, is he going to be okay?”

“He’ll live, but he needs to stay in bed. I want to know how he was injured.”

The mercenary who’d carried Bottaculli down answered, “A butler attacked him out of nowhere. One of his most trusted.”

“A slave did this? To his master?”

“Forget that. Did you heal him or not? It looks like he’s still in pain.”

I could have easily fixed that, but wanted to hear the full story first. “Like I said, he’ll live. Now, I want to know what happened in detail.”

The man glared at me, then sighed in resignation. “There are lots of slaves here, but Mister Bottaculli trusted his butler the most. The guy took a knife and ran it straight through his gut.”

He reaped what he sowed, as far as I was concerned. People could only endure a lack of human decency for so long. Maybe there was more to this slavery system than I understood, but none of that had anything to do with me or my life.

“And what happened to the slave?”

“See for yourself.”

I was surprised to hear they hadn’t killed him.

“He’s alive, but I dunno for how much longer,” another merc said.

Right on cue, bustling noises came from outside the room, and a second man was carried inside. He was probably the butler, based on his tailcoat, but I found it hard to believe that such a gentle-looking person could have stabbed anyone. The half-dead lump of flesh wheezed, likely pained from the aftereffects of harming his master, or possibly from a beating. He had one foot in the grave, and most healers would have given up on him, but I knew that I could save him

with just a single Middle Heal.

“I doubt he’ll try to run at this point, so don’t interfere,” I instructed the two men.

I healed the steward while the guards shouted in protest, but Piazza and Palaragus’s presence gave me peace of mind. Meanwhile, Bottaculli’s healers were trying every spell at their disposal to relieve the grimace on their boss’s face. They’d find no use for their healing magic in fixing whatever ailed him, though. Not even their Cure spells had any effect.

I moved to check on him one more time, then saw a barricade of frightened people forming just outside the room. More slaves, I figured.

“Are you the one who healed me?” a voice asked from below.

The butler had made a full recovery. The mercenaries erupted into noise, demanding the criminal’s head, until I firmly quieted them down.

“I’m Luciel, an S-rank healer. I was supposed to be working with you all starting today. Your master’s life is safe.”

“No, you can’t be here with him. You must stay away. Whatever your motives, your mere presence is a hazard to his health.”

“Glad to see you’re lucid. Mind if I ask some questions?”

“Anything.”

“First of all, why did you stab him? If I hadn’t been here, he could have died.” It hadn’t actually been that serious. I had to hear his motive, though.

“For peace,” he answered calmly. “The only solace for a slave is in death, and I believed that by bringing my master with me, I could be free of all the pain and hatred I’ve suffered.”

The placidness in his voice didn’t sit right with me. Something was off here.

“Healer!” a man interrupted. “You’re supposed to be the best of the best. When’s he gonna wake up? Can’t you do something?”

“Yeah, we need to get paid before he croaks, dammit!” another said, impatiently drawing his sword.

Their complaints, although morbidly justified, went in one ear and out the other. There were too many things about this incident that I had to get straight, and I couldn't get my mind off what Galba had told me yesterday. What was the barricade for? Had someone planned all this, knowing I'd be here? Bottaculli's healers seemed, to be blunt, strangely incompetent. And then there were the mercenaries.

"Okay, that's enough. Put that away," I said firmly. "You were supposed to be Bottaculli's guards, right? At his side at all times? I want to know how no one stopped this from happening."

Had they just sat there and watched? Had they trusted the steward that much?

"Mister Luciel," Jord interjected, "over at the barricade... I think those are slaves."

I darted over to look out at them but couldn't tell one way or the other. "I don't see any collars. You're sure they're slaves?"

"Uh, what era do you think this is?" he laughed. "People bound to servitude are marked in all kinds of ways, but these days they're branded with a magic crest on their back, neck, or the left side of their chest."

"I had no idea. Do you know what kinds of effects the crest has?"

"It depends on the grade. There are crests of absolute binding, physical binding, and minor binding."

I hadn't expected such a detailed answer. How did he know so much? He couldn't have owned slaves, although I had no basis for assuming that. If the levels of the crests had distinctions, maybe there was a way to undo them, and maybe Jord could tell me.

"I take it they're what keep the slaves from having free will."

"They don't quite rob them of free will, per se. Absolute binding prevents them from disobeying orders and slowly stunts their emotions over time. Physical binding causes the bearer to feel extreme pain when they try to act on their own. With those two types, you can also give orders for what they're to do after you die."

I felt utterly disgusted and was overcome by a strong desire to never be a slave. “So, you can force them to die with you or pass them to someone else who might be able to free them.”

“Right. Minor binding does control through pain but leaves the bearer relatively free, aside from a few things. They can’t harm their master, can’t commit suicide, and can’t be more than a kilometer from their master without feeling extreme pain. If the master dies, the slave is free.”

The butler’s expression never changed, like this information was common knowledge to him. I was even more confused about how he’d managed to hurt his master now.

“What about other kinds of slaves? Like petty criminals, debtors, lawbreakers, or prisoners of war? Are they branded too?”

“Yes. It’s up to the slaver’s discretion. Minor offenses only get minor bindings, while others vary depending on the parties involved. Slavers who bind willy-nilly are subject to divine punishment and aren’t allowed to trade.”

Jord’s vast knowledge shocked me. “You sure seem to know a lot about this.”

“Er, I guess. Kind of.”

“Let me get one thing straight. Can someone bound by a crest physically attack their master?”

“No. These crests are a kind of curse and just as absolute.”

I took it he hadn’t meant “curse” in the metaphorical sense. I locked eyes with the butler. “Is that true? Were you prepared to throw your life away?”

“I...I don’t know how to answer you.” He hesitated. “A life with no hope of freedom isn’t a life worth living. There was nothing to throw away.”

I could believe that as a motive but not as the element that had given him the ability to put the knife in his master. The man’s eyes were empty, devoid of hope. And someone who’d given up on everything had no reason to hide anything. Maybe if I removed his crest, he’d tell me how this had all started. Then again, some people could be stubborn.

“I see. Well, tell me something. Say you were freed from your pact... Would

you give up on killing Bottaculli?”

“The misery he made my life, I...I could never forget. But at this point, I don’t think I can bear to even look at him. All I want is to get away from here. Far away.”

“Do you think the other slaves feel the same?”

“Yes, I do. We’re treated like animals.” Grief filled his eyes with the kind of pain that no amount of magic would ever be able to heal. All of a sudden, I was keenly aware of the limits of my abilities.

“Then what do you say to making a deal with me? Fair warning: I’m not liable for the damages if you break your word.”

“What are you asking?”

“I’m asking if you want to be free. Oh, you know what, we need the other slaves here too.”

“You can’t be...”

“I am. Bring them all here.”

The butler blinked at me for a few seconds, my words slowly sinking in. Once they finally did, he dashed off and shouted throughout the estate for his fellow slaves to join us.

“Sir, you sure this is all right?” Jord asked with an uncertain lilt to his voice.

“Probably not, but I’m not about to let this nonsense continue. Worst case, I’ll have to compensate Bottaculli.” I turned to him. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“Er, I think we’re all worried about the same thing.”

The others nodded.

“I know what I’m getting into.” I was glad Shurule had no system of slavery in place; or rather, I was glad I’d lived a privileged life away from its ill effects. That disconnect surely played no small part in my reaction to what I was witnessing.

The steward quickly returned with over a dozen others.

“All right. Piazza, Jord, could you run to the Healer’s Guild and bring the

guildmaster? And anyone else with authority.”

“Yes, sir!”

“Sure thing.”

I watched them leave, then looked over the crowd of servants. “Thank you, everyone. Could you all please come here? You can trust me.” They cautiously stepped closer, the butler leading them. “Okay, listen up. If you were all given a second chance at life, could you live it without looking for revenge against your former master?”

Everyone nodded and agreed.

“Good. I’m going to have you all form a contract with me before I free you, understand?”

They nodded again. No one looked remotely dubious about my offer. Whether that was because I was an S-rank healer or because they were just that desperate was hard to say.

I looked down at Bottaculli’s ghostly white face. “Did you hear all that? Bottaculli the healer, your life is going to come at a price. If you want me to save you from your suffering, relinquish these people from theirs. Transfer their ownership to the Healer’s Guild. Do you swear to these terms?”

“I...swear!” the healer groaned.

His body shone for a moment, signifying the completion of our contract. In return, I cast High Heal, Purification, Recover, and Dispel in sequence, and the color returned to his face.

“You are all witnesses,” I announced to the healers and mercenaries present.

They nodded repeatedly. Thankfully, they’d been listening and didn’t need me to explain anything. All that was left to do was wait for Kururu. In the meantime, I had to find out how the butler had overridden the binding of his crest.

“So, how did you hurt your master? You couldn’t have done that while under your pact, right? How did you manage it?” I asked him.

“I’m unable to answer with the details, but someone overwrote my curse with

another one entirely.”

Then there *was* a third party involved. Most likely the same person Galba was after and who Bottaculli himself had been afraid of.

“I’m going to ask you a few more questions. Answer me clearly and concisely.”

“As best I can.”

“When did you accept the new curse?”

“Just recently.”

“Was the caster someone you knew?”

“No. I met them while out on orders to run errands.”

“Where did you meet?”

“On my way back, just after finishing my business. They called out to me.”

“And that’s when they told you about it?”

“Yes. We spoke of almost nothing else. I took the curse knowing full well what it would do.”

“Do you know what their goal was?”

“I didn’t ask, but I vaguely recall them mentioning disgust with how slaves are treated. Although it seemed like they had a personal grudge against Master Bottaculli.”

“Hmm. How did they apply the curse to you, and what did they ask for in exchange?”

“I don’t know how they did it. They simply cast it, then vanished into darkness.”

A regular person? Vanishing into darkness? Not likely. Only assassins were allowed to melt into the shadows, as far as I was concerned. No wonder Brod and Galba hadn’t picked up their trail yet.

“Do you think they called you over knowing that you were a slave?”

“Yes. I remember being surprised that they knew. It was night at the time.”

Too dark to notice any crests. Brod and Galba needed to hear this. “Do you remember anything else? Anything at all?”

“Very little. I think...” The butler strained his memory. “I think the person’s voice was rather high-pitched. Almost womanly.”

This culprit of ours was clearly up to something. I got the feeling they weren’t overwriting slaves’ pacts just to watch the fireworks, but whatever their intentions were, it was beyond me.

Just then, Kururu burst into the clinic. “Mister Luciel, what in the *world* is going on?”

“Sorry for calling you here so suddenly. Here I was, ready to study the workings of a clinic, when I saw Bottaculli being carried down the stairs with a knife wound in his gut,” I explained.

“Yes, I heard everything from the knights, but what are you doing freeing the slaves all of a sudden? Wait, before anything, how is Mister Bottaculli?”

“I’ve healed him. He’s fine, just in shock right now. I had him transfer ownership of his slaves to the Healer’s Guild as compensation.”

“You know what you’re doing, don’t you?”

“Sure do.”

Healer’s Guilds within the Republic of Saint Shurule were forbidden to own slaves. Guilds found with any in their possession were forced to free them, and I was rather proud of the idea that handy little rule had given me.

“I know you can’t just let criminal slaves run free, so I’ll leave them to the guild,” I said. “They could always be sent back with Bottaculli.” And they’d live happily ever after. Yeah, right.

“How are we planning on removing their crests?” Kururu asked.

“Leave that to me.” I was confident I could manage it with the Illusion Staff.

“So, I’m a slave driver? Is that what you called me here for?”

“Of course not. I want you to search Bottaculli’s quarters with his steward here for proof of corruption. I wasn’t planning on starting the investigation just

yet, but hey, this is a good opportunity to do some correctional work. Can I count on you guys?”

Kururu’s face twisted into a stiff, nervous smile. “Wow, you’re brutal.”

I hesitated for a moment and considered if I was taking things too far, but only for a moment.

“Please, it’s my job to make things right. The way healers think about their occupation is going to change one way or another once my guidelines pass, so I might as well use this situation as a test run.”

“I’m all for dealing with troublemakers, but I’d like to avoid ruling with an iron fist, you know?”

“I don’t intend to. I was never planning on making this much of a fuss here, but...well, the pieces fell where they did.”

“Okay, fine,” she sighed. “Investigate. Got it. Just so you know, I’ve never done this before, so I’ll need some helping hands.”

I was glad I’d convinced her. “Right. I heard there was some kind of defunct investigative committee at the guild when I first registered, but that’s probably going to change in the future as we start rebuilding our image. There’s going to be a lot more of this kind of thing.”

“Of course. Anything for you, Mister S-rank, sir.”

“Er, can you please talk to me like you normally do? You *are* a guildmaster. The formalities are unnecessary.”

“Yeah, yeah. Anyway, let’s get to it.”

The healers and guards could only stand there and watch as the search was carried out. We quickly discovered that all but two of Bottaculli’s servants had been enslaved against their will.

“Sorry for the wait, everyone,” I called out to the group. “I’m going to dispel your crests now, so gather round!”

I tried a Purification spell first, to no avail, then Dispel, and that did the trick. One after another, I removed the curses from all twenty or so slaves, except for the aforementioned two, after being sure to form contracts with each of them.

“I expect you all to uphold our deal. You’re to leave this place and bring no harm to Bottaculli. You’ll each be given ten silver to start new lives. If you need somewhere to go, I recommend the Adventurer’s Guild.”

“Luciel, we have a problem,” Kururu said, carrying over a stack of parchment just as I finished handing out the money.

I looked them over. “It’s a list of Illumasian slavers and buyers.”

“Look at them all. All these adventurers and citizens, sold to the Empire against their will by their own healers.”

I said nothing. There were easily over a hundred pages. I barged into the examination room where Bottaculli was sitting up, now awake.

“How does it feel?” he said languidly. “Did you enjoy trading my life for my wealth? If so, then you and I are not so different, oh great S-ranker.” The venom in his words abruptly died as they left his soulless body. He seemed to have aged an eternity.

“I saved you because it was my duty, not to steal from you,” I shot back. “I’m not interested in your fortune. I know you might think you’re the victim here, but you brought this on yourself.”

He glared at me. My team readied themselves, but I had them stand down. “I should have been done with you when I had the chance. Well? What words do you have for me? Seeing as you’re S-rank, I’m obliged to listen, Sir Healer.”

“I want to know how this started,” I demanded. “Why are you working with Illumasian slavers? Why are you stealing people’s lives? People who came to you for *help*?”

Bottaculli crossed his arms, closed his eyes, and said nothing.

“The documents aren’t lying! You’re buying and selling people for dirt cheap!” I shouted. “You used to be a good man, Bottaculli. A genuine healer. How did this happen?”

After a moment of silence, he said, “I’ve long forgotten.”

“Don’t try that with me. Do you want me to bind you to another contract? Or do I need to order you to fess up by authority of the pope herself?”

“It was...” He strained to speak. “It was for my daughter. I thought healers could cure anything, everything, but disease is beyond even our hands. After I lost my wife, my girl was all I had left, and the Illumasian Empire made me an offer I couldn’t refuse. They said they could save her.”

“In exchange for selling your patients as slaves.”

I couldn’t fault him as a parent for being willing to do anything for his child, but had it never occurred to him that the people he was hurting had families of their own? Maybe even kids?

“Where is your daughter now?” I’d found no evidence of children around the estate.

“I haven’t seen her in over ten years. She lives in Illumasia and takes care of servants, so I hear. That’s why I needed more. I have to get her back.”

“Ten years? It never occurred to you in all that time that what you were doing was wrong?” Silence. “I sympathize with you and your daughter. I can understand your position as a parent. But why would you hand her over to the empire? You surely had other options. You could have turned to Headquarters or a Doctor’s Guild.”

“If I could brew elixirs, don’t you think I would have? And the doctors of this country are washed up. I had none of the options you say I had. But the empire... When I heard they had what I needed, I didn’t hesitate. I knew it was wrong, but there was nothing I could do, I tell you.”

I pitied him. I really did. But the moment he knew he’d crossed a line, he should have ended it there.

“Listen, Bottaculli, I won’t sugarcoat things. The people you ruined had families just like you. And what about your daughter? What would she think about all of this? Has it ever crossed your mind that they’ve been playing you for a fool?”

He hung his head. It never came back up. I didn’t want to kick him while he was down, but the man had gone too far. I couldn’t let him off.

“By order of the Healer’s Guild, you are hereby forbidden from taking your own life. Your valuables are to be sold off and the Church will decide further

punishment. Your clinic will be repossessed by the guild and repurposed into an orphanage.”

“What?! A-An orphanage?”

“That’s right. That said, the lack of a clinic could be an issue for some, so it will still function as one in some capacity. They’ll be expecting you in the Holy City, Bottaculli.”

He grimaced. “I won’t let this stand.”

“I need two knights and one of my healers to accompany him, please.”

The miserable man shuffled outside without a single glance back at me. I started to compose a letter to Her Holiness, then remembered my arclink crystal and contacted her immediately. After explaining the situation, she entrusted the matter to me.

With that out of the way, I spoke to the butler one last time.

“So, about the curse caster. Do you remember anything about their build?”

The former slave looked baffled. “A caster, sir? I’m afraid I don’t understand. You’ve given me my life back and I want to assist you however I can, but there are limits to my knowledge.”

“You know, the curse that overwrote your crest. We were just talking about it.”

“Sir, is such a thing even possible?”

“What? Jord, I’m not crazy, right? You remember us talking about curses before, don’t you?”

“When did that happen?” he replied. “I don’t remember anything like that.”

I blinked in shock. No one else in my unit knew what I was talking about either. Could there have been a demon in our midst? I cast Purification around us just to be safe, but no one seemed averse to it.

At a loss, I resigned myself to the fact that I’d have to convene with Galba and my master before anything would make sense. Before I could begin the investigation, though, there was the matter of Bottaculli’s subsidiary clinics.

Ultimately, we decided to enforce the guidelines on them early, as a sort of trial run, although it would severely limit the free time I'd have to spend at the Adventurer's Guild outside of lunch breaks.

As I toured the city's clinics, I found out just how bad things had gotten. Most had prices twice as high as what the guidelines called for, with the worst as high as four times the acceptable amount. To help things along, I had the new prices posted publicly at the Adventurer's and Healer's Guilds. Merratoni was going to be my first step in making this profession respected again.

Nearly all of Bottaculli's former slaves had sturdy builds, so some left to become adventurers while others stayed to work at the orphanage. The few lawbreakers that we couldn't set free ended up at the Adventurer's Guild doing odd jobs, thanks to Gulgar and Galba offering to take them in.

The audits proceeded, days passed, and I found myself learning a lot about how clinics worked along the way.

One day, I had the free time to stop by the Adventurer's Guild, and Nanaella grabbed my attention just as I came in.

"Luciel, you mentioned wanting a haircut a while ago. Still need one?"

"Actually, yeah. I remember telling you how annoying it is having it this long. I'm used to having it tied up, I guess, but I really prefer it shorter."

"Why don't we head to the back and take care of that now?" Monica offered, urging me forward.

We stepped out into the back garden with the well.

"Feels like it's been forever since I came out here. Also, is it just me or are you weirdly excited about this, Monica?" I was too shy to continue with that train of thought, so I changed the subject. "Hey, remember that time you guys cut me while doing this?"

Years ago, during one of my first haircuts, I'd put my faith in them and had been betrayed. What I had thought would be a gentle and careful affair had turned into them getting a little too riled up and accidentally nicking my cheek. There was no lasting damage—all it took was one little Heal to fix it up—but

from then on those two had been *extra* cautious with scissors around my head.

“Oh, come on, that was forever ago,” Monica huffed. “Now, what style are we thinking?”

“Same as always is fine,” I said.

“What if we got a little adventurous?” Nanaella asked hopefully.

“As long as I can still show my face in public. I’m trusting you two, okay?”

Their grins grew even wider.

“Hear that, Nanaella? We got permission.”

“Wanna chop off half from each side?”

“Yeah, let’s get the length nice and even.”

I suddenly had a very bad feeling about this, but there was no way out now.

The ceremonial cutting of the ponytail soon ended. Jord and the others got a good laugh out of seeing my new look but didn’t forget to bug me about introducing them to the girls. In my irritation, I told them it wasn’t happening until they could land a hit on Brod (spoiler: none of them would).

My team and I quickly came to be known by a new name in the time that passed: The Order of Healing. The adventurers, meanwhile—curse them and their traditions—had taken to calling us the Order of Horror from the shadows.

As our work continued, it became increasingly clear that the Healer’s Guild and its clinics were severely lacking, so I started cycling my healers through them to help get things on the right track. Eventually, I began to follow the guidelines myself and offered my healing at the proper rates, making exceptions for children and the elderly, of course.

The days flew by, and the day where I would have to return to the Holy City drew nearer.

The dining hall was closed—a strange occurrence indeed for the Adventurer’s Guild. Brod, Gulgar, Galba, and I sat inside sharing drinks. Of the alcoholic variety, for once.

“Damn, you got guilds and clinics figured out fast,” my master commented. “Where to next? Yenice? Rebuildin’ a guild from scratch doesn’t sound easy.”

“I agree. But I’ll try to hang in there with Gulgar’s recipes and Galba’s intel.”

“You always have a place to come back to if you need it. We’ll be here to help, as long as you’re not sticking your nose in something bad. Not that I think you ever would.” Galba’s eyes were warm and trusting. “You might make mistakes, but stay on the right path.”

“I know. I always say I’ll do anything to survive, but I’d never want to be ashamed to look any of you in the eye.”

Brod grunted angrily. “Says the guy makin’ a shitty habit of ditching training.”

I hadn’t missed a single morning or evening sparring session. The audacity of this man... “Master, would it kill you to be in a good mood before I leave?”

“I know where he’s coming from,” Galba said. “Give it some time and you’ll reach our level. Say, maybe a decade of hard training and you’ll be there.”

“If you’re optimistic, sure. You think normal people can vanish into thin air, reappear behind someone, and cut skin with dulled blades? You’re all insane.”

I’d never seen them fight, but I knew that went for Galba and Gulgar too. Was there no world of sunshine and rainbows where I could live peacefully?

“Your healing magic’s pretty nuts too, far as I can tell,” Gulgar said.

“My Holy Magic skill just reached level ten the other day, but I’ve still got a ways to go,” I confessed. “I’m frustrated with how I handled Bottaculli. I could have done so much more, but I just lectured him. Magic doesn’t solve everything. It can’t heal diseases. It can’t heal wounds of the mind.”

“Luciel,” Galba interjected, “that orphanage you founded wasn’t for nothing. You’ve made meaningful changes, and we’re going to make sure it doesn’t go to waste. Plus, I hear Bottaculli’s practically turned over a new leaf at the capital, so that’s one less thing you have to worry about.”

“True, but that wasn’t because of me, and apparently it only created conflict with the Church’s factions. At the end of the day, he changed because the archbishops broke down his walls and helped him open his heart. I only waved

my stick around without really understanding what it means to have authority.”

There was no weight, no dignity or grace to my actions or words. Without those qualities, everything I did would fall flat, no matter how sincere I was.

“No shit,” Brod retorted point-blank. “You’re barely twenty. People like us have lived twice your lifespan, and you’re comparing yourself to us? You want people to take you seriously? Then ask for help. Learn from others and soak it in. Otherwise you’ll wind up another flunky shouting at the wind.”

“Sure, young people mess up,” Galba added. “But life’s not so simple that those mistakes define who you are. No one accidentally finds success. I think what you need to do is learn from this experience and grow.”

“Words carry weight, and that weight comes from the life of their speaker. Experience,” my master continued. “You don’t gotta act bigger than your shoes. Only person you need to impress is yourself. Live, fight, grow. That’s the way to be, but the way’s not always forward. Sometimes you need to stop, and that’s when you rely on us. None of us are perfect, none of us are alike, but we’re here for each other, even if we can’t make the tough choices for you. The second you feel yourself slipping, you come to us, and we’ll whip you back into shape. Don’t you dare try to take everything on by yourself. Understand?”

I was moved. Just moved.

“What he said. Now try my new invention!” Gulgar interjected.

“That’s a...unique smell.” I winced. “Wait, where is everyone going?”

I failed to see the connection between our discussion and Gulgar’s offer. As if I had a choice in the matter, although I liked to pretend I did.

“Luciel, would you mind being quick about it? My nose can’t take much more,” Galba groaned, visibly pained. He had only his brother to blame.

“Eat it already, or I’ll whoop your ass in our next fight!” Brod shouted.

Now that was just cruel. We were almost four hundred levels apart!

“Probably tastes like garbage, but you got it. Pull this off and I’ll give you the legendary secret sauce recipe left behind by one of the most famous chefs in the world!”

I was no match for these three and never would be, so I shut up and ate the darn doria (a creamy rice casserole dish infused with my least favorite substance). Never had I seen my life flash before my eyes after eating something until that moment.

“Anyway...” I collected myself. “Did you look into that curse I mentioned that’s overwriting crests? Any clues about who our shadowy culprit might be?”

Galba looked at me with a raised eyebrow. “What are you talking about?”

“Bottaculli was stabbed by his butler. Don’t you remember?”

“What? That’s ridiculous. You must be overworking yourself.”

“Master, you know what I’m talking about, right?”

“Sorry, no way Galba wouldn’t catch wind of somethin’ like that,” he rumbled. “Why are you bringing up the guy’s injury again?”

Because I knew this would happen. “I mean, he was stabbed by one of his own slaves.”

“Sure, but it was an accident. The slave fell down the stairs with a knife in his hand, that’s all,” Galba said.

There was no question anymore. Their memories had been altered.

“Speakin’ of shadowy,” Gulgar cut in, “I hear that black-haired receptionist quit her job at the Healer’s Guild.”

“Yeah, she did,” I replied. “Something about trying life as an adventurer around the Holy City. Said she knows someone there, I think.”

Kururu had grown quite fond of Estia, so she hadn’t been open to the idea of letting her go. It’d taken a good deal of convincing.

“Almost feels like she’s on Bottaculli’s tail or somethin’,” my master remarked.

“Just don’t tell my team about it, okay?”

Estia’s polite and gentle demeanor was a far cry from the Valkyries, but she had nonetheless been an invaluable asset in keeping our morale high.

“Eh, I trained ’em up good. They’ll really be something once they learn to

work off each other better.”

“I appreciate the help. Now, I should head off early. I want to stop by the orphanage.”

“Let’s do this again sometime, yeah?”

“Definitely.”

I enjoyed drinking with everyone, don’t get me wrong, but my thoughts were racing with this mysterious mind-alterer.

I strolled along the moonlit road towards Bottaculli’s manor-turned-orphanage. The funds earned from selling his possessions had been used to buy back as many of the people he’d enslaved as possible, but there were too many beyond our reach. The only solace we could take was in the children we’d given a home to.

Loyalists from the Church had distributed additional guidelines for solo healers as well. As for me, I was still getting over the shyness from being in a news article. It made me hopeful about the future of the public’s impression of healers, though. Hopeful that one day we’d see more healers in Adventurer’s Guilds.

The clinics of Merratoni were now all operating under my guidelines and charging their prices accordingly. And although I’d gotten chewed out via arclink for diverting guild income to form a fund for slaves, I was proud of the changes in this town and of the improving relationship between the people and the healers. So much of it had been brought about by individuals and ideas beyond myself, and the entire experience had turned out to be one big human (and beastfolk) experiment, highlighting our differences, our similarities, and our difficulties with understanding each other.

It brought tears to my eyes, thinking about all those I’d surely hurt, or at the very least inconvenienced, with my incompetence, but who still spoke to me with kindness. I wanted to learn to be proud of myself some day. To believe in myself the way others did.

I recalled the way my chest had started to ache lately whenever I opened maps of any kind. Like the Eternal Dragons were calling to me, summoning me

to their prisons. But it was everything I could do to get by where I was now, let alone go labyrinth hunting. Conquering another dungeon, to say nothing of slaying dragons, with the little strength I'd earned since my first encounter was a pipe dream.

Still, the ache was there.

I sighed. Those poor dragons. If only I were wiser, more daring, or more courageous, maybe I could be the hero the Holy Dragon needed me to be. Why had he chosen *me*, anyway?

I wasn't going to find the answer to that question. All I could do was pray that the path I chose going forward was the right one. So I made a decision. Living a peaceful life and dying of old age was no longer my only goal. I wanted to save people from suffering, rescue every life I possibly could, and to do that, I needed to travel the world. I was ready.

Months came and went, my guidelines were passed into law, and all the guilds and clinics of the world learned the new rules.

14 — The Power of Words and a New Goal

Her Holiness and I met in her chambers once my work in Merratoni was complete.

“Luciel, your efforts on behalf of the Church and guild do not go unnoticed,” her mystical voice resonated from behind the veil.

Despite her words, the extent of my achievements thus far ended with Merratoni. All I’d done was improve our reputation there slightly; the rest of the glory belonged to everyone else.

“Thank you, Your Holiness,” I said, having already kneeled and bowed as usual, “but your words are wasted on me. There are others more deserving of them.”

She chuckled gracefully. “In just three years, you have accomplished much. The labyrinth we had resigned ourselves to is no more. You formed the foundation for a restructuring of our guild and tore out the corruption at its roots. No, my words are far from wasted. They are insufficient.”

I was just as surprised by myself as she was. Jord and the rest had been absolutely nuts about our work, and I’d lost count of how many times I’d had to get on their cases for letting their emotions run too high.

“Thank you, but I still think it was only luck that pulled me through the labyrinth, and I was never alone. There were so many others who felt the same way. All I did was happen to take the reins.”

“We are not so different, then. It was only because of my father that I inherited the position I hold now.”

The veil lifted and crystal blue eyes beneath golden hair looked back at me. The doll-like girl’s delicate features seemed almost too perfect to be anything but divinely crafted. Her immaculate and cherubic smile struck me. Not with love, but with awe. She was beautiful. In the purest sense of the word.

“My father founded this nation, and thus this Holy City, in the heart of the land, so that others might find salvation. But he also founded it for me. So that

allies the world over could shield me from the flames of war.”

The founder of Shurule was Lord Reinstar himself. If he was her father, just how old *was* she? Scratch that—that was a question I definitely shouldn’t voice. But seriously, she didn’t look any older than me.

“Your gaze tells me you are curious about my age. Very well. This year I will be 322.” She giggled playfully. “Surprised?”

“Er, in a word. Pardon the lack of tact, but how are you still alive?” As far as I could tell, she was a regular, beautiful young woman.

“The genes of my high elf mother, I would assume.”

Wait. I tilted my head. I was almost positive that Lord Reinstar had been monogamous and that his wife had been decidedly human. Not an elf by any stretch.

“I thought Lord Reinstar had only one wife.”

“You are correct. Lizalia, I believe her name was. She was a headstrong woman, but kind and often indulged me as a child. My mother, however, was madly in love and pleaded with my father to bed her, just once, so that she could abandon her feelings. And so I was born.”

Excuse me? That was just about the craziest thing I’d ever heard. Lord Reinstar must have been popular in more ways than one.

“I read that it’s rare for children to come from parents of different races. You’re like a walking miracle.”

“Please, you’ll make me blush. To be sure, my mother and father were certainly not average people.” She looked off into the distance as if in fond remembrance.

“Is that why you hide your face?”

“Indeed. Halflings such as myself were not well-liked in the past. The curvature of my ears is not so telling of my elvish heritage, but my unchanging appearance is not easily hidden. So my youth became a blessing of the gods, and I was deified. Or so I hear the story goes.”

Clever plan, Reinstar.

“Why are you telling me all this, Your Holiness?”

“I thought it improper of me to keep secrets from the man who did what I could not; who revived my father’s legacy from the ashes. I refuse to be so discourteous.”

“I’m humbled, Your Holiness.” I could think of nothing else to say.

“Your presence reassures me, Luciel. It gives me hope for the future. I feel that with you at our side, we can overcome any trial. Know that I am always praying for your success.”

I felt the weight of her expectations, and I was more than a little nervous, but nonetheless knew that it changed nothing about what I needed to do.

“Thank you. I’ll do everything I can on my travels, and nothing less.”

“Be sure to write or contact me via crystal, is that understood? Do not forget. Now, your next destination will be the nation of Yenice.”

“Yes, Your Holiness. I pledge to see this duty through to the absolute best of my abilities. We will leave first thing tomorrow.”

“Go with heart, my healer.”

And so the next morning, my guard, the Healer Pentad, and I—together making up the “Order of Healing”—left for foreign lands. To mark our departure, the guidelines went into full force in every corner of every country, with me, the author and new blood of the Church, at the forefront.

The whole world now knew my name.

Five years had passed since I’d started my new life in another world.

Side Stories

01 — The Demon of the Adventurer's Guild

Before Luciel ever set foot in the Merratoni Adventurer's Guild, rumors about a demon who lived beneath the guildhall's floors abounded. Local adventurers, however, knew better, and drank to the poor, ignorant souls who had no idea what they were getting themselves into.

Injuries were the leading cause of early retirement among adventurers, but the only way to survive on the low-paying work their lack of status restricted them to was to accept as many requests as possible. And that was only for solo adventurers. Times were even tougher for those in parties, who had to split the compensation several ways. So the confident ones would take extermination contracts above their ranks with a group of inexperienced newbies, end up injured in the field, and the cycle continued.

One of the primary issues was that many newbies didn't know what it meant to be an adventurer. Ideally, new adventurers would avoid combat-related requests entirely and use their time to study monsters and other essential knowledge, as well as practice their fundamentals and teamwork in the training grounds. Only then, after about a month of solid education, would they be ready to accept combat jobs.

Were this common knowledge, the number of wounded would have dropped drastically, but to be an adventurer was first and foremost to be independent, and veteran adventurers very rarely shared their experience with anyone but those they were close with. In Merratoni, these lucky few would find themselves guided into unknown depths where their abilities would ultimately reach new heights—a hell ruled by none other than Brod, the guildmaster. A hell where, unfortunately, none had lasted more than three days, and that record went to the Lineage of the White Wolf.

The party of beastfolk (a race known for having greater physical prowess than

humans) knew who their teacher was. Brod, the Whirlwind, was one of the greatest adventurers to ever live, so they had been more than eager to learn from him, and they would have continued to do so had they not run short on money. Still, over those three days, they had absorbed every ounce of wisdom they could. And for their efforts, they quickly rose above their peers.

Other newbies occasionally made appearances in the training grounds, but it never took long for them to start griping and subsequently give up. Eventually, Brod had to start personally inviting mid-to high-ranking adventurers in order to keep his own skills from deteriorating.

This man was the “demon” of the Adventurer’s Guild. Whispers of him spread like wildfire, but the feats accomplished by those who survived his domain were undeniable.

“What I’d give for a bit of excitement right around now.”

Brod stood in the training grounds beneath the Adventurer’s Guild. His nearly three-decades-long career as an adventurer had a humble beginning. Weak and alone, his first steps had been small, painstaking, and he’d devoted himself to training before anything else. The only jobs he’d cautiously taken were requests that he was certain matched his abilities.

It wasn’t until reaching A-rank that he really began to feel strong. Up until then, his mind had never wavered from his one singular goal of improving, of constantly upping the ante on himself, but when he’d found out his peers had christened him the Late Bloomer, his eyes had been opened and he’d noticed things he never had before.

His fellow adventurers were gone. And not just them—even younger adventurers who’d registered before him had all retired. From then on, Brod never looked away from the truth again. He suddenly couldn’t ignore the mess around him anymore. Talented newbies were taking on reckless jobs, mid-rank adventurers were growing complacent, and parties were constantly breaking up and re-forming while nothing ever changed.

Eventually, Brod found himself his first party—a group led by a wolf-man named Galba and his younger brother, Gulgar—and they hit it off well. But Brod

couldn't escape the fact that given how weak he was, his words would never carry weight, and he would never be able to protect anyone. He needed to get stronger.

One day, a pack of monsters was attacking a village. Leaving Galba to protect the citizens, Brod and a small group set out to face the threat. The enemy was relentless and came at them from all sides, but Brod slew them with ease, saving his fellow adventurers in the process. He seemed to be everywhere at once, faster than a gale, and he would have been awarded with the appropriate nickname if someone else hadn't beaten him to it. So they dubbed him the Whirlwind instead. This would cause him no end of grief down the line.

Deeds like these were what eventually elevated Brod to the rank of S, but he took no pride in it. Because he hadn't looked away. His accomplishments couldn't lengthen the short lives of most adventurers or their careers.

He went to Adventurer's Guild Headquarters and declined the honor of SS-rank, requesting a different kind of accolade instead: that of guildmaster.

"I need an apprentice. Someone tough who doesn't back down."

Perhaps this wish was what summoned Luciel to Merratoni.

02 — Words That Kill

There was one man in Merratoni who no wise individual ever wanted to make an enemy of. He was not an unreasonable man, to be sure. Should your paths cross, your life would be spared in exchange for information. All who dwelled within the underbelly of society knew this rule. His name: the Recluse. Currently, he was in the business of information, but it wasn't so long ago that he had dealt in lives rather than words. Once upon a time, he'd lurked in the shadows, watching, listening for the right moment to snuff out his enemies. Or so the rumors said. No proof of his bloody past remained.

By day, he was the monster butcher at the local Adventurer's Guild, known by just about every beastperson there. His charming features and winning smile had won him the affection of women the world over and were some of his best assets in the gathering of intel.

Trouble eventually came in the form of a bloodied girl from the Healer's Guild, carried on the back of a young man he'd become acquainted with. All signs pointed to it being the work of a healer with a grudge, so the Adventurer's Guild took her in.

"Now, this sounds interesting. Could be worth looking into how the Healer's Guild is connected to this."

Galba made his way to the slums.

"I have a task for you," he said to the ten or so beastfolk around him. "A staff member of the Healer's Guild was attacked by a mercenary with a poisoned blade. I want you to spread rumors around town, and in exchange you'll be healed at the Adventurer's Guild."

"What if we capture him?"

"I'll buy him off you for info. Also, keep in mind the healer involved in this is as bad as they come. Send anyone looking for help to the Adventurer's Guild."

"Got it. We won't disappoint you, Recluse."

The speaker seemed to have somewhat a better grasp on the situation than

the others, so he led the effort. However, Galba had pride in his own talents as a spy and was sure to be thorough.

“I want to hear everything you learn. *Everything.*”

“With haste and subtlety!” the group replied.

“I’m counting on you guys.”

The truth had begun to come to light.

Several days later, Merratoni’s Healer’s Guild was troubled by a lack of personnel, and rumors had begun to spread about the cause. Word on the street was that a certain top healer had plotted to take the life of one of the guild’s receptionists after the two had fallen out. The guild took measures to brush the matter under the rug, but word of mouth was a frightening thing, and nearly everyone in town had heard about it by the next morning.

More time passed, and the suspect was eventually captured, but no one could find any connection between him and the healer in question. The case came up empty, the guild was out a receptionist, and by refusing to acknowledge the controversy or confront the clinic that had caused it, they only fanned the flames more. The people quickly moved on to chattering about the guild’s priorities, or its lack thereof in regards to the lives of its staff, and soon no one felt safe working there. There seemed to be no end to their troubles in sight.

Kururu was beside herself with frustration. “Goddess, what am I even going to do? Monica was *perfect*! Who’s going to replace her?”

She was used to changes in staff, including losing valuable workers like Monica, but what was she to do on such short notice? As cushy and well-paid a job at the Healer’s Guild was, it wasn’t enough to convince people to apply for the opening, and in the meantime it was on the other receptionists to give up their free time to pick up the slack. The ladies begged their guildmaster to petition Headquarters for aid, but true to his conservative ideology, he refused to rock the boat further.

Forced to bear the brunt of it all, Kururu anguished over their new schedule. “There’s just no room for days off. We’re going to keep losing people at this rate.”

Visitors to the guild were rare. The only matters that typically needed tending to were registration, membership renewal, taxes, grimoire purchases, and dispatchment clearances. It was an easy job with few responsibilities, so it was little wonder Kururu and her fellow receptionists were mentally exhausted...out of sheer boredom. Without Monica, the others were subject to day after day of absolutely *nothing*, forced to sit through their shifts in spite of the lack of work.

In its early days, when it had been thriving, the guild had bustled with healers who needed to be sent all over the place, but as the scales of power tipped towards private clinics, the staff held less and less of a role until they'd been diminished to a fraction of their initial relevance.

"I'll need to ask the girls for their input on the workplace. I wonder what work's like at an Adventurer's Guild. Must be great for meeting guys."

Kururu's grief was an unfortunate side effect of Galba's plan. The wolf-man listened to her grumblings from the shadows.

"Didn't know there were people who actually took their job seriously here. Shame it had to turn out this way, but I'll go ahead and stop the rumor mill, for whatever good that'll do. Now, I wonder what keeps their guildmaster up at night."

With that thought, Galba's deep dive into the identities of Merratoni's top healer and his guildmaster accomplice began. Meanwhile, Kururu desperately clung to and trained the few employees she had left.

03 — A Recipe to Die For

A man was brooding in the kitchen of Merratoni's Adventurer's Guild.

"Gah, it's a bust! How do I turn this into food?" He stared reproachfully at the freshly cooked creation, then he ever so carefully brought a bite to his mouth. He promptly retched, his wolflike ears twitching in distress and tears welling up in his eyes. He didn't even bother to chew and simply gulped it down with a quick glass of water. As he struggled to catch his breath, he removed his nose plugs, hands trembling, then went out like a light at the wretched stench.

This unfortunate wolf-man's name was Gulgar—head chef of the Merratoni Adventurer's Guild—and the circumstances of his collapse were far from ordinary. He was creating something: a new menu for the guild. But not just any old menu. No, this one focused on a special ingredient.

"Smell...bad..." he mumbled, half-conscious, while the dark purple Substance X gurgled nearby.

Crafted by a sage about a century earlier, it was said the substance had the power to awaken potential in anyone who drank it. However, not just anyone had the ability to stomach it. Its stench alone made it a near impossibility for beastfolk given their heightened senses of smell. The courageous ones who could endure that first step then had to brave a mouthful as the rankness seeped throughout every orifice and assaulted their nasal cavities from the inside out, paralyzing their senses. Most who made it that far would shut down completely, their brains unable to physically process the taste. Those who didn't were the substance's chosen few.

Gulgar's first encounter with Substance X had been in his early adult years, when he'd followed in his brother's footsteps and become an adventurer. The veterans were holding a ceremony, a "baptism," they'd called it, and having the newbies take drinks. That day, they knew true fear. Gulgar ran without even trying it and didn't look back until some time later. But the rancid smell piqued his curiosity, and one day it got the better of him. He cast aside his inhibitions and decided to give it a go.

He felt his knees tremble at the sight of the bubbling liquid before him. But if he didn't put this to rest here and now, he'd live his life wondering what could have been.

"Let's do this!"

He threw the mug back, and the world went dark. When he came to, he was surrounded by darkness. The only thing he could see was his own body.

"What's goin' on?"

Gulgar strained his eyes to get his bearings and noticed the counter of a bar, of all things. Something was very wrong here, so he approached it slowly and peered into the nothingness. There, he saw the purple liquid shift and change into an anthropomorphic figure. He gulped in fear.

He heard a voice echo inside his head. *"I see you."*

The figure lumbered towards him and suddenly attacked. It was slow but horribly foul.

"I know that smell!"

He threw his fist at the creature made of Substance X, believing that defeating it was his way out, and it blew apart with surprising ease.

"Yes! Now I—" The droplets on the ground quivered just as Gulgar was assured of his victory. "What?!"

The puddles grew larger, then assembled into more figures of liquid. Fear crept up his spine, and he ran.

"Waaaiiit for uuus."

"Get me outta heeere!"

The figures didn't let up, never rested, and Gulgar kept running. But then he came to a dead end. The figures closed in, and there was no way out. Just when all hope seemed lost, a light broke through the darkness.

Then he woke up.

Gulgar gasped for air. "It was a dream? Oh, thank the gods."

"Good morning."

“Oh, Galba.” His older brother had been watching over him.

“Your nap didn’t look very relaxing.”

“I was bein’ attacked by Substance X, bro!”

Galba laughed. “They say people who waste that stuff earn a punishment from the sage himself.”

“That was punishment? Wait, how come you weren’t punished?”

“Me? Why would I ever drink that stuff? After all, I’m *made of* Substance X.”

Galba’s face melted and his body turned to liquid.

Gulgar jolted awake. “Just... Just a dream,” he wheezed, then grunted. “Gotta get ready to open up. Think I’ll give whoever manages to eat this crap half-off. Incentivize ’em a bit.”

After that traumatizing experience during his youth, Gulgar would never dare to cross Substance X again. At the time, no one knew it could make people stronger, and he only found out the shocking truth after Galba’s sleuth work around the Adventurer’s Guild HQ.

Substance X could enhance physical growth for several hours after consumption. Once this came to light, Gulgar knew how to put his cooking abilities to use. One day, he would successfully create a recipe that incorporated the liquid seamlessly.

He pulled himself off the floor and prepared for another day of hungry adventurers.

04 — Girl Talk

About twenty or so people worked at the Adventurer's Guild in Merratoni, and nearly all of them were women. This had less to do with hiring practices and more to do with the nature of being an adventurer.

It should come as no surprise that a great deal of aspiring adventurers, particularly young men, looked up to heroes and believed their own potentials were limitless. But the real world was hardly that simple. More often than not, this bravado only put them in danger when faced with monsters they had no business challenging or caused them to run themselves into the ground on rigorous escort duties they had no prior experience with.

Adventuring was essentially freelance work, which meant the income wasn't stable. Oftentimes, this meant that many adventurers eventually had to find a different job or take out loans, but at that point they might as well have announced directly to the guild how shortsighted they were, and that in itself removed any chance they had of landing a nice position with the guild right off the bat.

One might think the guild would surely hire successful adventurers with an eye for profit, but they would be wrong. Being successful as a mid-rank adventurer and being successful as a guild staff member were two very different things, and life as the former suited wayward souls far better. All the more so for high-ranking adventurers who made a living without issue. Plus, working for the guild wasn't easy; it required extensive knowledge and expertise that only a mind open to learning could handle. And frankly, that just didn't describe the average adventurer.

Now, while this was true for the vast majority of men, female adventurers were far less common, which meant that the few who did exist were rather exceptional. While not many reached the upper echelons of success in the field, a good deal of them found their place in guild work. The fact was, the barrier of entry for adventuring as a woman was higher than normal, so most who made it to that point were inherently more qualified. Some also attributed the prevalence of women in guildhall positions to a stronger desire for stability than

men, who were apt to seek fortune and fame, while others said that Adventurer's Guilds were just great hunting grounds for marriage candidates (a feature that Healer's Guilds lacked for want of...well, *desirable* partners).

Regardless of the reasons, women made up the vast majority of the guild's workforce. And a young healer who'd started living in one in Merratoni about a year before had become a common topic of discussion among the staff.

This strange afternoon, when the Adventurer's Guild was devoid of adventurers, was no different.

"Hey, so what's the scoop? You've been chatting up Luciel a lot lately."

"Yeah, don't act like you two haven't been getting buddy-buddy over lunch."

Melina and Mernell smirked playfully at their less experienced coworkers, Nanaella and Monica.

"There's not really anything to tell. We've just been talking."

"Yeah, we're just friends, and not even close ones yet."

"‘Yet,’ she says. Go on, spill it. I wanna hear what you've ‘just been talking’ about," Melina pressed.

"Nothing special," Nanaella said. "We just share our days with each other. You know, just random stuff."

"And you, Monica?"

"Same here. Nothing special. I really enjoy chatting with him, though. He's such a good listener."

"Oh, I know what you mean," Nanaella chimed in cheerfully. "We'll just talk and talk sometimes, and he never looks bored."

"Right? He's so mature for his age."

The older receptionists stared at the girls with raw envy. Luciel was like a younger brother to Melina and Mernell, and they hardly considered him remotely romantically viable, but men who truly listened were few and far between. The ability to engage in a conversation that had nothing to do with oneself was a rare skill.

“I might have to borrow that kid one of these days.”

“You girls mind? I could really go for some venting,” Mernell grumbled.

“Nope, not at all!”

“Give him a try!”

Neither Nanaella nor Monica felt safe challenging the intensity emanating from their friends.

Mernell nodded, proud of her polite colleagues. “You know, I feel like I’m not getting the attention I used to. I might need to start getting serious about finding a guy to settle down with.”

“You think so too?” Melina asked. “I guess some of us just aren’t that young anymore.”

The two glanced at their younger counterparts and stared in silence. Monica and Nanaella waited with bated breath, praying for the awkwardness to pass.

“We’re just messing around,” Melina giggled. “There’s no point in rushing to find the right person. I’m only, what, three, four years older than you girls?”

The pair opposite them finally sighed in relief, but they weren’t convinced it had entirely been a joke.

“So Luciel’s a good talker, huh?” Mernell asked, changing the subject. “What does he even have to talk about other than how many times Brod’s punched him?”

“Yeah, I’m impressed you two can even keep a conversation going.”

Everyone at the guild knew the deal with Luciel. He ate, slept, trained. There was nothing more to him. Or so they thought.

“He’s plenty talkative,” Nanaella smiled. “He’s been telling us his favorite foods and the kinds of clothes he likes lately.”

“And he has all sorts of stories he’s made up himself. They’re wonderful to listen to.”

“Stories? Didn’t know he dabbled in that,” Mernell remarked. “And wait, he actually has opinions on fashion? All he wears is the stuff people give him. And I

don't think I've ever seen him come upstairs in anything but torn-up rags."

"Me neither," Melina said. "And it's all either too tight or too baggy. I thought he went shopping with you, Nanaella?"

"He says he only wears those clothes on his days off. He doesn't want to ruin them during training."

"Brod's been tearing up a lot of his stuff now that they're using swords and spears, so most of his wardrobe is hand-me-downs from other adventurers."

"Sounds rough. So, what're his tastes like?" Melina asked.

"Fairly average? I think the outfits we chose when we went shopping looked nice, but it wasn't a lot, so it's hard for me to say."

"They at least fit him, right?"

"Of course. He tried everything on first."

"Well, I'm glad he has that much sense. I swear, you never know with that kid," Mernell sighed. "Oh, we've got a live one."

A party of adventurers came in as the other three were nodding in agreement.

"They're probably gonna go to one of you," Melina said, smirking at the younger girls.

"Oh, I could cry," Mernell added dramatically. The ladies took much delight from Nanaella's and Monica's nervous reactions.

This was just one quiet moment out of many that the Adventurer's Guild receptionists shared.

05 — The Valkyries

Among the Knights of Shurule, there was one regiment of paladins composed entirely of women. Strong, proud, and beautiful, this team was known as the Valkyries, and their leader, Lumina, was the strongest and proudest of them all. However, as the youngest to ever be given the honor of captaining, she wasn't without her worries.

"Deployed again, and only us," she mumbled to herself. "Maybe we went a little too far during our joint training."

Paladins and templars, each divided into four regiments, made up the Knights of Shurule. Templars were people from various jobs and classes who had sworn their loyalty to the Church, totaling about two hundred individuals. In comparison, there were just fifty or so paladins, as only those who possessed the paladin class itself or had hopes of becoming one made up their ranks. At the bottom of the hierarchy, the Valkyries were the smallest paladin regiment, made up of eleven women, including Lumina.

All of the regiments from each knight division participated together in joint exercises, one of which was currently taking up space in Lumina's head. The nature of those exercises was never the same twice in a row and this one had been a battle royale. Naturally, everyone's attention had been focused on eliminating the smallest regiment first—the Valkyries—expecting little resistance.

On the contrary, the ladies had swept through the battlefield and demolished the competition. They had won without a single casualty and the knights' pride was hurt, so deployments and expedition duties were being dumped on the women without end.

"So petty. If only they were as modest as Luciel..."

"That's asking a little much," Lucy interjected, overhearing her.

"Quite. The boy takes our beatings yet somehow still treats us as *women*," Elizabeth added.

"I didn't realize you were listening."

“It’s kind of hard not to when we’re all eating at the same table,” Marluka said. “But you seem tired. Don’t forget to take care of yourself, okay?”

“If you need a little Luciel spice in your life, want me to go grab him for you?” Gannet offered with a smirk.

Lumina tilted her head. “Luciel? Why? He’s currently in the labyrinth, so I doubt you’ll find him.”

“Er, forget it.” Gannet silently paid her respects to him.

“She’s being dim, right?” Queena whispered to Myla. “I don’t think she notices, but she totally needs some Luciel.”

“Yes,” the other replied, “Lady Lumina tends to be unaware of her own feelings.”

“I’ll get to work.”

“For Lady Lumina.”

“What if we set them up? That could be fun,” Kathy joined in.

“I’m not sure I like pairing her up with a guy like that, but if it’ll help...” Ripnear said.

“She needs this right now.”

“Well, I can’t deny that.”

Saran suddenly interrupted and blurted out, “Huh? You don’t got eyes for him, Lady Lumina? Sure coulda fooled me with how much you two look at each other.”

“Oh, I know, right? I think they’ve been like that ever since people started calling him ‘Saint Weirdo’ or something,” Beatrice added without a hint of shame. “You gonna eat that, Saran? Gimme.”

“It’s all yours.”

The girls’ secret conversation went up in smoke. Everyone’s eyes focused on Lumina, expressions blank and expectant. She was dumbfounded for a moment, but soon a slight smile spread across her face.

“Is that how we looked? I see. Yes, it’s true that seeing Luciel’s growth makes

me happy, but I feel the same way about all of you. Oh, now I'm remembering his unfinished training. If only there were time for me to instruct him before our mission."

She sighed. Although the others felt there was *probably* a difference between her feelings for them versus her feelings for a man, they had never experienced romance themselves, so they could say nothing in return.

Sensing a drop in Lumina's spirits, Elizabeth wracked her brain and hatched an idea. "Why not write him a letter?"

"A letter?"

"Yes, that way you can tell him what needs to be said and teach him what he needs to know. I imagine he would write you a reply as well."

"A sound idea, but how would I deliver it to him?"

"It might get nabbed if you're not careful," Saran said.

"True." Elizabeth paused for a moment. "Do you two share any acquaintances you could entrust with it?"

"I believe I know someone. Thank you, Elizabeth."

"My pleasure."

"Now, what to write?"

As Lumina's thoughts turned, her beaming smile spread throughout the Valkyries until everyone shared it.

06 — Nicknames

Adventurers had a habit of applying titles to famous individuals as a way of marking them for their achievements. Nicknames were a tradition, and the Merratoni Adventurer's Guild was home to its own share of individuals with the honor.

First and foremost was Brod, the guildmaster. Anyone who had witnessed the way he blew through swathes of monsters at unfathomable speeds back during his adventuring days could agree on one thing: the man was an unstoppable cyclone. Unfortunately, "Cyclone" was already taken at the time, so he earned himself the moniker "Whirlwind."

Next, there was Gulgar. For him, the phrase "when I was little" never made much sense. He was, and always had been, a behemoth, and his stature only grew with age. While most wolf-folk were known for their agility, Gulgar took his uniqueness in stride and used his inherent strength to become a literal shield for his allies. Covered in full plate armor, a shield in one hand, and a greataxe in the other, no blow could make him falter, but the same couldn't be said for whoever was unlucky enough to take a swing from his weapon. "The Crusher" seemed a suitable name for him at first, but more striking than his strength was his sheer unyielding nature. So he became the Immoveable. Similarly, the Chef seemed a little lacking due to his size, and the Bear Chef eventually stuck.

Finally, the last of the trio was Galba. Every beastfolk adventurer worth his or her salt knew this man's name, and that he was never to be trifled with. Some shunned him for his popularity with the ladies, but no one was brave enough to ever speak out directly.

Back when he was still adventuring, Galba specialized in scouting, particularly espionage. Initially, he'd learned those skills purely for self-defense against monsters, but he quickly began to take notice of shadows behind certain requests and began to use his talents to find out more. Soon, he realized just how valuable the information he got his hands on was, and how fun it was to be in possession of it. He knew the enemies he would make by continuing down

this path, but his abilities were second to none and, all of a sudden, those enemies were no more. Only Galba knew this anonymous informant's true identity: the Recluse.

These three were some of Merratoni's most highly regarded adventurers, but there was about to be one more. Currently, in the Adventurer's Guild dining hall, the ceremony for bequeathing a new nickname was in progress.

"The guy's not so bad, for a healer," a man in full armor said earnestly.

"For sure," a cat-woman agreed. She was, in fact, the very first person the healer in question had ever treated. "He can't be all that rotten if he heals people like me."

A man with two swords and light gear nodded. "And he's got guts. Musta been a warrior in his past life."

Oddly enough, he wasn't particularly far off. If white-collar workers could be considered warriors of modern society, that is.

"Ya think? I hear the Whirlwind's losin' his wits," a woman with a masculine tone retorted. "Says he's got no sense."

"Maybe his brain got left behind."

"Sad."

The adventurers took a moment of silence for their ignorant healer.

"Gotta hand it to him, though. He's been at that training for months now. I know I woulda high-tailed it a long time ago," the armored man said.

"Got that right," the dual-wielder replied. "I'd rather be up against monsters than the Whirlwind, but he sticks it out."

Suddenly, the archer who'd been silent until now spoke up, "The boy's in love. What else could it be?"

The conversation quickly devolved from there.

"What? I heard he just likes it rough, if you know what I mean."

"Oh yeah? Good to know."

"Get your mind out of the gutter. But I've also heard he's always got this

weird grin on his face when they're fighting."

"Me too, but I thought he and Nanaella were kinda an item."

"No way, they're like siblings. He's just into it, I'm tellin' you. Have you seen how he drinks all that you-know-what?"

The armored man's words rang true, and no one could disagree.

"Y'know, I hear he's an adventurer."

"He's not staff?"

"Nah, a friend of mine who works here told me. He heals for free, the Whirlwind trains him. That's the deal."

"Talk about masochistic. That's what we oughta call him: 'The Masochist.'"

"We'd be walking on thin ice callin' him that. And if he's somehow *not* a fetishist, the Whirlwind'd lose it. He's been runnin' short on punching bags lately."

"A very good point. We'd better be careful."

"What about the Holy Healer? I'm hoping he keeps on good terms with beastfolk in the future."

"That's a surefire way to get the Church and supremacists mad."

"Why don't we just give him a bunch of names? Then whatever sticks, sticks."

"You, my friend, are a genius."

And so, a boy named Luciel became the first healer to earn the right to bear a nickname that day. Rather, *many* nicknames. Many, many nicknames.

"By the way, you guys hear about that black-hair adventurer who almost got whooped by a horned rabbit?"

The adventurers goofed off late into the night.

07 — The Lineage of the White Wolf

The Lineage of the White Wolf had just returned to Merratoni after seeing Luciel to the Holy City. Brod greeted the three members at the door just as they arrived at the Adventurer's Guild.

"Back safe. Luciel make it all right?"

The party smiled, amused that Brod cared more for his apprentice rather than the mission itself.

"He did fine. Healed at every village we stopped at without griping," Bazan reported. "He seemed pretty happy just to have food and a bed."

"The hell kinda tour did you three take him on?" Brod smiled. It was just the sort of plan he knew Luciel would have come up with himself.

"We were helpin' him network. Ain't that right, Sekiros?"

"Something like that. I will say, he didn't seem used to riding in a carriage, unless he was holding onto his butt the whole time for fun. The breaks in between probably helped."

"Hell, that's exactly why I didn't want him leaving so soon!" Brod grumbled. "Bottaculli, that rat bastard."

An angry Brod was a dangerous Brod. The more irritated he got, the higher the probability he'd drag someone down to the training grounds to "vent," and Bazan knew it.

"C'mon now, no need to get all worked up. I think the guildmaster there's got a pretty good idea of who he is after he asked for Substance X."

"Sure, things didn't turn out as planned, but he's in good hands, at least," Sekiros added.

"The capital's as racist and awful for poor people as ever," Basura announced. "But I doubt Luciel'll ever leave HQ itself, so there's nothin' to worry about."

"Yeah? Maybe you're right. He say anything before you left?"

The Lineage's famed teamwork had saved them. This time.

“Just that he’ll be lonely without everyone. I’m sure he’ll manage, though,” Sekiros replied.

Brod paused ominously. “Wonder if we could set up an exchange system between guilds.”

The air in the guildhall immediately thickened with tension.

“Whoa, whoa, let’s not get hasty!” Bazan panicked. “The beastfolk here need you!”

Merratoni’s Adventurer’s Guild was unique in that about half its staff were non-human.

“He’s right,” Sekiros agreed. “You became a guildmaster to bring up the next generation of adventurers. You can’t prioritize one apprentice over them.”

That was the burden of being a guildmaster.

“Yeah, he’s your apprentice ’n all, but we gotta be ready for whatever storm that kid ends up brewing,” Basura said.

That was true. Luciel wasn’t normal. It was highly unlikely that he would make it back home without raising some form of hell.

Brod thought about it for a moment. “You’re right. It’s out of my hands.”

“You almost gave me a damn heart attack.”

“Seriously. That would’ve made us look really bad.”

“Holy shit, that was close.”

The surrounding adventurers heaved a collective sigh of relief, but it didn’t last long. Because Brod then shouted, “All right, next generation! Everyone not on a rescue mission get downstairs! Newbies, room and board are free if you can stick it out!” And just like that, despair reigned the hall once more. “Oh, and you three, don’t think I didn’t hear you call me ‘guildmaster.’ I’d better see your asses down there too.”

In lieu of his time with Luciel, these mandatory training sessions became a frequent occurrence. All for the sake of the new generation.

A year passed and the Lineage of the White Wolf became the strongest party in Merratoni, both officially and colloquially. But there was one man not even they could lay a finger on, and that was Brod. For all their synergy, the A-rank party had never once come close to besting their guildmaster.

It wasn't that they were slacking; far from it in fact. They battled fearsome monsters, leveled up, honed their abilities constantly, and thought of nothing but one day tasting sweet victory. But it wasn't enough. So Bazan, as the leader, had begun to wonder if leaving Merratoni for somewhere new, somewhere more challenging, was what they needed to get out of their slump.

"Whaddaya guys think about going to Grandol? Try and get a little stronger?" he asked the other two.

Sekiros looked confused. "Is there a reason we can't be in Merratoni?"

Basura shared his apprehension. "Honestly, I'd rather stay here."

"What's gotten into you guys?"

"The thing is, I'm actually dating Melina right now. From the guild," Sekiros confessed.

"I'm seeing Mernell, myself," Basura admitted.

"We wanted to tell you, but... Well, it's just, after what happened to you..."

"It was kinda hard not to find out considering we're, y'know, going steady with the receptionists."

Bazan's friends looked at him with guilt in their eyes.

"So, cat's outta the bag, huh?" A month after they'd returned from the Holy City, Bazan had confessed his feelings to Nanaella. They'd gone out with their friends, gotten to know each other, and finally Bazan had felt it was time to make his move. But it wasn't to be.

"I'm sorry, but...there's someone else," she'd told him. "I don't know if it's love or not, but these are feelings I don't want to ignore. I can't."

"Oh... Okay, then. Well, I hope we can still work together. As friends."

"Of course."

He couldn't even bear to remember her expression at the time, the pity and awkwardness, so he'd shoved his feelings as far down in his heart as he could.

Bazan looked at his friends and wondered about the future of the Lineage of the White Wolf. How long did they have left? If reaching the top wasn't their dream anymore, if the other two retired, would that be the end for them?

"So, are you two done adventuring? Or do you just wanna keep things as they are?"

"Oh, we're not done. We've still got a long way to go," Sekiros said.

"Got that right. We're the Lineage! Our bonds are thicker than blood!"

"Pff, where'd you get that energy, Basura?"

Bazan felt a smile coming on.

"Hey, when the mood calls for it. Listen, I'll have a talk with Mernell, okay?"

"Good idea. I'll see what Melina thinks."

"You guys..." Bazan was overjoyed. "You guys are the best."

Not long after, Sekiros and Basura tied the knot with their respective partners. Melina and Mernell quit their jobs at the guild and joined the Lineage of the White Wolf on their warrior's journey into Grandol, the Land of Labyrinths.

Afterword

Hello, it's me, Broccoli Lion! The guy who was actually, for real, farming broccoli until just a few years ago. Thank you so much for reading volume three of *The Great Cleric*. I wouldn't be here without your continued support.

He originally never had this big of a role, but I really got into the idea of Jord as Luciel's partner and trusted advisor, so I added quite a few scenes with him this time around. Why? Well, I saw volume two's cover art and just thought he fit the role! There was really nothing more to it than that, and when I started writing, it just kind of worked. He really suits the vice-leader position, so I think we'll see more of him in the future.

What else? You know, you'd think I'd be used to it by now, but I still haven't gotten the hang of these afterwords. So I'll just take the time to reflect on the year.

By this time last year, I'd been shortlisted for the Webnovel Awards, *The Great Cleric* was being formally published, and I was drowning in deadlines for the first volume. And who can forget how my AC broke, causing my old PC to overheat and forcing me to shell out for a brand new one? Thinking back on it, maybe that was where my habit of terrorizing Mister I right before a deadline began.

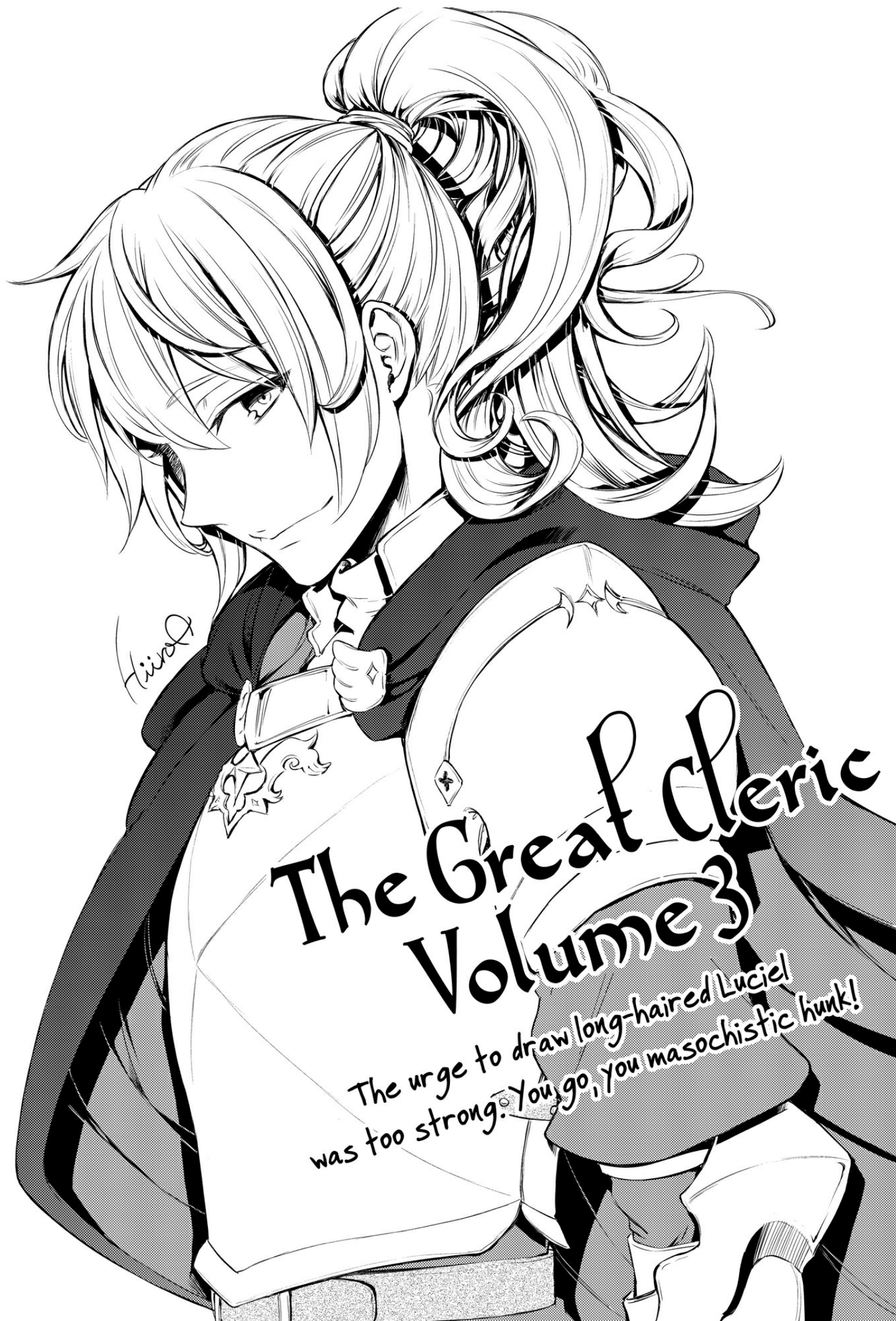
Despite my pestering, Mister I really worked hard on turning this series into a manga until it finally began serialization in the *Suiyobi no Sirius* magazine the day volume two was published. And finally, volume one of the manga has been released! Right on the same day as this novel! Was that ad a bit too obvious?

Hiroyuki Akikaze, the artist, really has outdone himself with his ability to capture my clumsy writing in such beautiful illustrations. If you haven't bought a copy yet, I would be very grateful if you did. There's something amazing about seeing this world brought to life through pictures.

With that said, I really must thank my editor, Mister I, once again for his patient and constant help with both the scheduling and editing of this book.

Without him, there would be no volume three. My thanks also goes out to sime, of course, for keeping the world and characters looking wonderful in spite of all the nitpicks. And the same goes for Hihiro Akikaze. I'm sure I'll continue to be a pain to work with, but nonetheless, I hope you'll keep putting up with me.

Lastly, thank you, reader, for reaching the end of this book. Please stick around for more and I'll keep striving to make something you can love and enjoy.



The Great Cleric Volume 3

The urge to draw long-haired Luciel
was too strong. You go, you masochistic hunk!



Bonus Short Stories

Helping Hands

Bottaculli's unfortunate and unexpected accident had put Merratoni's Healer's Guild, as well as its clinics, in a very rocky situation, and the responsibility of setting things right now fell to Luciel. These sudden obligations combined with resuming his training with Brod left the S-rank healer with very little in the way of free time, and his struggles didn't go unnoticed by the Adventurer's Guild receptionists.

Nanaella and Monica were discussing these concerns about their friend one day.

"I'm glad we got to chat when we cut his hair, but I can't help feeling like he's been avoiding us lately," Nanaella said. "I know he's not, and I'm just being silly, but still."

"You're thinking too much," Monica replied. "Remember how happy he was when we finished? Plus, and this is just between you and me, I know what's been keeping him so busy."

"You do? I couldn't get a word out of the men he brought with him. Have you been taking lessons from Galba?"

The other made a face. "It's like you forgot where I used to work. An old coworker and friend of mine actually just became guildmaster of the Healer's Guild, so I've got myself a trustworthy source."

"My regards." Nanaella's ears perked up. "Well? What is it?"

It was all Monica could do to keep from giggling. "So, the reason Luciel came back was to study up on how guilds and clinics are run, but then Bottaculli, you know, the guy who runs most of the clinics here, got sent to the Holy City. And not just that, but the old guildmaster had his hand in dirty business, and there are funds missing from the guild's treasury."

“That doesn’t sound good.”

“No, it doesn’t. But Luciel didn’t want to leave town right after getting here, so word is he’s learning what he came to study at the Merchant’s Guild.”

“Really? What about the healers and clinics?” Nanaella couldn’t lie. She was happy to hear that Luciel didn’t want to leave but at the same time hesitant to support his actions. The healer’s greatest enemy was his own dedication. He had a tendency to bite off more than he could chew, and Nanaella worried he would work himself ragged.

Of course, in reality, the Extra Heal spell meant that Luciel was in no physical danger (save for mental fatigue), but Nanaella had no knowledge of that.

“He’s still working with them. It sounds like a lot, but I guess that speaks to how much responsibility he’s carrying these days.”

Nanaella cast her eyes down. “Just when I thought we were getting to know him, he comes back and he’s like a completely different person.”

“Bad.” Monica lightly chopped her head between the ears, then chose her words carefully. “Don’t be so down, okay? We’re not family or even dating for that matter. We can’t know everything, and hey, isn’t it more fun that way?”

“You know, I wish I was as cool as you sometimes.” Nanaella greatly admired her friend.

“Oh, um, thanks.” Monica blushed, cringing at herself for talking big to an older girl, and about romance, no less. “Anyway, back to Luciel.”

“Let’s see, how can we put a smile on his face?” Nanaella thought for a while. “I know he’s always been happy when we cook or go shopping with him.”

“Right. Why don’t we ask Gulgar to teach us a thing or two about cooking? Even Luciel’s gotta eat sometimes.”

“Good idea. Let’s go find him.”

“Nanaella, we’re still on the clock. Let’s maybe wait for our break first.”

“Oh, right.”

The girls went on to study under Gulgar as planned, and the joy this would

bring their dear friend could have very well been a story all on its own.

Brod and the Order of Healing

Brod, guildmaster of the Merratoni Adventurer's Guild, could barely contain his excitement—a feeling he hadn't experienced since his apprentice had been sent to the Holy City by Bottaculli. He stood in the training grounds with a smirk plastered on his face at the mere thought of what was to come.

"You're serious?" he confirmed. "You want me to train your grunts?"

"Very serious," Luciel replied. "I trust you guys with them. Oh, but that doesn't mean I'll be slacking on my own training."

The guildmaster was to whip not only his apprentice but his apprentice's entire team into shape.

Brod looked at the men behind Luciel. No matter what the healer wanted, none of it would matter if his underlings didn't share his zeal. The guildmaster quickly noted the looks in their eyes and knew that it wouldn't be a problem, but whether their resolve was strong enough to carry them through remained to be seen.

"All right. On one condition."

"Anything, as long as it's reasonable."

"The healers need to help treat adventurers, and that includes beastfolk. I want the knights patrolling town. Sound good?"

None of them flinched.

"Patrol? Why? Have things gotten dangerous since I left?"

"Nah, but word on the street is, someone's dumbass apprentice keeps stickin' his nose where it doesn't belong."

Luciel's team nodded to each other in thoughtful agreement.

"Um, words are hurtful. And you guys, whose side are you on?!" his apprentice griped. "Anyway, sure, I'll agree to those terms."

"Yeah? Just so you know, I don't hold back. Personal policy," Brod growled at

the unit, letting his facade down and his fearsome grin shine through. But again, no one flinched.

“Thank you, sir!” they said together.

“My pleasure. Now, I want to see what you’ve all got before we get started. Luciel, you’re up first. Come at me!”

“Yes, sir!” he responded.

“Show me you haven’t been slacking!”

“I’ll do more than that!” Little things like this were all it took to send Brod’s mood soaring.

And just like that, the training grounds once more became a realm of shrieks and laughter—Brod at the helm of combat training and Gulgar ensuring the men’s diets were rife with the proper nutrients for bodybuilding. Including Substance X.

As their training continued, Brod was astonished. While most adventurers ran with their tails between their legs, Luciel’s team not only endured his hellish sessions but thrived on them, asking questions and actively learning. On top of that, the healers had gone above and beyond with their part of the deal. They healed all adventurers, regardless of race, selflessly, even past their own physical limits. Whenever their magic started to run dry, they’d send for Substance X and chug it down then and there, stoic as statues.

Compared to their lily-livered, adventurer counterparts, who Brod had become so used to in spite of his good intentions, they were in a league of their own. Brod couldn’t help but like them, so he, Gulgar, and everyone else in the guild did whatever they could to lend a hand.

This group, the representatives of the Church of Saint Shurule, would come to be known as the Order of Healing to those they aided. They would also become the foundation of the widely-feared regiment known as the Tools of the Divine.

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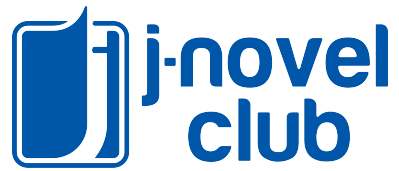
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The Great Cleric: Volume 3

by Broccoli Lion

Translated by Matthew Jackson Edited by Tess Nanavati

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